

It started with a kiss.

Maybe it started earlier. Maybe he'd had feelings for a long time that he hadn't ever realized. Maybe he should have recognized what was going on when Cho first accused him and Hermione of being more than friends. Or maybe it was even earlier than that, in a more innocent time. But it was the kiss that changed things.

The kiss itself was uncoordinated, the kiss of two people unsure of what they were doing. It was innocent, pure, like nothing in his life had been for a long time. And it was relatively uncomplicated, a simple act of showing affection and feeling.

It happened in Harry's sixth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He and Ron left their homework to the last minute, as usual. Hermione had done hers days ago, as usual. At the moment, Harry and Ron were trying frantically to finish three rolls of parchment on the "Dangerous and Complicated Ritual of Becoming an Animagus".

The three of them were curled up on the floor of the Gryffindor common room. A roaring fire lay in the hearth beside them. Harry was having particular trouble finding a way to express his thoughts coherently. The fact that Hermione was busily reading their every word wasn't helping much, either.

At around midnight Ron yawned sleepily, stretching languidly. "Done!" he said proudly, handing it over for Hermione for inspection.

Hermione picked it up, reading it over with a red-correcting quill. "Ron, witches and wizards don't turn into bats! It just isn't done!"

"So? It's just an example. Who cares whether or not it's true?"

"Truth is the law binding every piece of writing together!"

Ron scowled at her, grabbing at his essay. "Ever heard of fiction?"

"This isn't supposed to be fiction! This is an ESSAY! For class!"

"Yeah, well, it's still just a point! It doesn't have to be true!"

"Have you ever heard of a wizards or witch turning themselves purposely into a bat!?"

"Yeah. Loads of times."

"Name one."

"I... I'm... I'm going to bed!" And, blushing furiously, Ron snatched up his stuff, stood up, and walked off in a huff.

Harry watched him go, an amused smile on his lips.

"What are you smirking at!?" Hermione demanded heatedly.

Harry tried to wipe the grin off his face, but didn't quite manage it. Unconsciously, he shifted a little closer to her. "Nothing," he replied quickly.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I should think so."

Studying her, Harry decided she wasn't as annoyed as she was pretending to be. He nodded his head in the direction that Ron had just fled. "Why do you guys bicker so much?"

Hermione looked away from him, staring into the fire. "I don't know. It just always seems to happen. I don't really mean to, you know."

Harry nodded. "I know."

"Think he'll be mad at me in the morning?"

"Probably not. He's only angry because he knows you're right, anyway." Harry looked at his own, unfinished essay and sighed. "In the meantime, you could help me with mine."

Hermione took a look at it. "Harry, you only have one paragraph written here."

He sighed in frustration. Standing up, he paced the room, clearly agitated. "I think it's 'cause I know too much about it. Every time I hear the word 'animagus' I think about—"

"Sirius?"

Harry nodded, continuing to stalk around the room. "I can't... I can't focus on it. All I can think about is how much he had to give up and where that got him. I don't know how to put that in an essay. I don't know... I can't be objective about it. It's..." Trailing off, he sat back down, cradling his head in his hands.

He sensed her shift next to him. She placed a hesitant, but supporting hand on his back. "Then don't write it," she said softly.

Harry couldn't help but give a tiny bark of laughter. "You can't be serious..."

"I'm serious," she said quietly. "Harry, look at me."

He did. There were tears in her eyes, and he was very, very aware of the hand that was still nestled on the small of his back. Her gaze was penetrating, her eyes looking at him with sympathy but understanding. His heart sped up. His mouth felt dry. And he could hear a low, dull ringing in his ears. He licked his lips.

She smiled, the tears glistening in her eyes. "It's not worth it."

"You think..." he continued to look into her eyes, trying hard to keep his mind on their present conversation. "You think McGonagall will understand?"

"Screw McGonagall," she said forcefully. "This is only one grade. We'll just have to work twice as hard on the other stuff."

We'll... Harry blinked, taking in her words. How come he'd never noticed how pretty her curly hair was, framed around her face? Or how vulnerable misty eyes made her seem? Or how much he desperately wanted to protect her and hope that she never had to face any of the darkness in their world?

He did a mental double take. Hermione. This was Hermione. What the hell was he thinking?

They stared at each other, faces inches away until he could feel the soft puff of her breath tickling over his skin. He closed his eyes, moving closer, taking in her sweet scent. That was when she jumped up, pulling away. He opened his eyes, a sudden emptiness creeping over him.

She was standing up, bouncing nervously on the balls of her feet and tugging at her hair. Frazzled, she began to gather up her books. "Well!" she said cheerfully. "Look at the time!" She picked up another book, one Harry was sure didn't even belong to her. "It's getting late!" She began to pick at an imaginary piece of lint on her sweater. "I'm tired! Oh, yes, very, very tired!"

Harry continued to stare at her stupidly in incomprehension as she babbled on. His mind moved rapidly through what had just nearly occurred, and he found he couldn't quite process it. "Hermione!" he cried sharply, his voice coming out louder than he'd intended.

She was so startled that she dropped all the books that she'd been busily picking up. Harry found himself grinning at her. She looked absolutely adorable, her face wearing a slight look of panic, and her usual calm temperament a flurry of anxiety and nervousness. Without thinking about what he was doing, he stood up and strode over to her. Cupping her face with both his hands, he leaned in.

The kiss was hesitant and Harry was all too much aware of his sweaty palms and pounding heart. But the innocence in it nearly broke his heart. He closed his eyes, losing himself in the softness of her lips and the sweet taste of her mouth. He let her wash over him and, for just a moment, he felt free and safe like he'd never experienced before in his life.

When he pulled away, her eyes were closed and he still framed her face with his hands. They remained motionless, speechless for a minute. He used the silence and the calmness of the moment to study her. He rubbed her cheeks in a circular motion with the pads of

his thumbs, enjoying the way the softness of her skin felt under his fingers.

He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead. When she opened her eyes, she found herself looking into his intense and slightly adoring gaze. "Harry..." she whispered, her throat painfully dry.

He just grinned. "Yeah?" he said lazily.

She found herself grinning back. "You just... we just... you and I... we just..."

"Yeah," he said again, in that same noncommittal tone.

She smacked him on the shoulder. "Don't do that!"

He looked hurt and rubbed plaintively at his shoulder. "Do what?"

"You know!" she gestured with her hand. "You can't just... you can't just do that!"

"Why not?" His tone was low and dangerous, but she could clearly see the hurt shining in his eyes. Body ridged, he began collecting the beginnings of his animagus paper. "I think you were right, it's getting late."

"Harry!" she sighed, frustrated. Grabbing his arm, she gripped on to him until he looked at her. "I didn't mean it like that... I was just surprised, that's all. I mean... Harry, this changes things."

Harry shrugged her arm off and went back to collecting his stuff. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm going to bed."

"Harry, stop! Please!"

He stopped, only because he realized that he was acting like a jerk. He felt a surge of anger looking at her. He'd put it all out there, he made himself vulnerable. And she had just... just brushed him off.

"What are we going to tell Ron?" she asked, her voice pleading and a little lost.

The surge of anger increased. "What does Ron have to do with anything???" Harry demanded harshly.

"He has to know... we can't just not tell him! This'll hurt him. You know what he's like..."

Harry furiously picked up his pen and parchment, throwing them together. "Right. That was my first worry. How Ron would react. Why didn't we discuss that first?" Shaking, and feeling like all he wanted to do was curl up somewhere and be alone, he turned around. "I'm going to bed."

"Harry!" her voice caught and he heard a small sob escape from her lips. He kept moving, but heard her cover her mouth with her hand to muffle her cries. She sunk to the floor, her hand not quite enough to muffle the noise of her crying. At the door to the boys' dormitories, he stopped.

He turned around, his eyes softening at the sight of her curled up on the floor, knees pulled up to her chest, tears leaking from her eyes. The hurt look she gave him, made him feel slightly sick.

He felt the anger drain out of him. Dropping his parchment on the floor, he went to her. "Aww, shit. Hermione, I'm sorry." He crouched down next to her. "I handled that like a moron. I'm sorry."

She continued to sob and refused to look at him. Hesitantly, he reached out, smoothing a lock of her hair behind her ear. "C'mon, Hermione. I'm really sorry. We'll work it out. I'll go tell Ron now, if you want."

She smiled despite her tears. Pleased that he was getting somewhere, he began to rub her back in what he hoped was a soothing motion. That seemed to do it. She leaned against him, pressing her face against his chest. He felt her tears soak through his shirt, wetting his skin underneath. He continued to rub her back, stroking her hair.

"Shhhh, it's okay, Hermione. It's okay. Just stop crying... please just stop crying." He tried to sound soothing, but couldn't help the pleading note that crept into his tone.

She chuckled slightly, but somehow managed to keep sobbing. He was very much relieved when she began to calm a few minutes later. She continued to lean against him, which, Harry discovered, was just fine with him. Rubbing pathetically at her eyes, she smiled sheepishly. In a tearful voice she said, "You must think I'm really emotional about everything."

Harry shook his head, rubbing away the tears on her face with his thumbs. "I just think I must have acted pretty badly to make you so upset. I really am sorry," he offered again.

She gave him a watery smile. "I know you are. And I'm sorry, too. I didn't mean to react that way. I was just caught off guard, I guess. And a little scared, too. I've never... well, you know, with someone before."

"Not even with Viktor?" Harry had completely forgotten about Krum. The reminder, however, made his stomach take a small, unpleasant roll.

"No... we never got that far." Hermione lapsed into silence. "Harry, I think that I..."

Harry stared down into her eyes, surprised again at the feelings he was experiencing. Her tears reminded him again at how vulnerable Hermione really was. He knew she was giving him power, power that would let him hurt her. And he the same. Giving her an out, he said. "I know, me too."

"What are we going to tell Ron?" she whispered again, sounding a little lost.

Harry felt a flash of anger at the mention of his friend's name, but suppressed it. He nodded. "Yeah. It won't be easy."

"We'll tell him together."

"Yeah, okay."

They lapsed into silence again. Finally, Hermione said, "You're really good at that you know."

"Good at what?"

"Calming hysterical women."

Harry laughed. "Well, that was my first time, if you can believe it."

"I don't really know what came over me, honestly."

"I hurt you," he whispered.

Hermione pressed a finger to his lips. "Shhh. It doesn't matter now. I'm okay."

Harry didn't say anything, but his eyes glinted with amusement. Hermione realized that she was still pressing her finger to his lips, and she pulled it sheepishly away. Harry yawned widely, suddenly feeling bone tired. "Maybe we should go to bed," he said, continuing to yawn.

"Okay." She stood up, stretched. He stood, too, studying her and pondering everything that had just occurred.

She was right. This had changed things.

"I'm not going to sleep tonight," she shared.

"Me neither."

They hugged good-night. Harry desperately wanted to kiss her again, but he honestly couldn't remember how he'd done it the first time around. He touched the tips of her hair before pulling away. He watched her leave, making sure she got to her dorm safely before turning and going to his.

It was going to be a long, sleepless night.

Harry was the first to wake into the quiet, early morning. He got up and dressed quickly, the cold floor pinching at his bare feet. He gave a quick, guilty glance at where Ron was still blissfully sleeping. Alone with his thoughts he was able to admit to himself that at least part of the reason why he'd woken so early was to avoid having to look his red-haired friend in the eye. He could also admit that Hermione had a point, he did know how Ron could get sometimes.

Hurrying down to the Great Hall, he wasn't the least bit surprised to find that the only other person up and there before him was Hermione herself. He slid into place next to her. She was stirring a cube of sugar into her coffee mug and didn't so much as look at him when he sat next to her.

"Hermione," he said, quietly.

She blushed, and huddled near her mug to blow on it. She still refused to look at him.

Well, that was fine then. He wasn't exactly the most chatty morning person either. Even grumpier than before, Harry picked at a slice of toast that had appeared next to him. He could hear Hermione stirring her coffee again, the metal hitting the sides of the mug with a dull ting. She had yet to take a sip of it.

"Harry..." her voice was so soft, he was almost afraid that she hadn't really spoken after all. When he glanced at her, she was still hovered down near her mug, but she was biting her lip in concentration. Harry had known her long enough to recognize that she had something very important to say, but first needed to work out how she wanted to vocalize it.

Finally she said, again in the same soft tone so that Harry had to lean forward to hear her, "Was last night real? It seems so far away now... but you're here and I... I don't really know how to act." She lapsed into silence again. "I know everything. And everything I don't know I can look up. But this is different and I don't want to do the wrong thing, say the wrong thing, and..." she went back to biting on her lip. She took a deep breath before starting again. "Is this really happening?" she said again, in an even softer voice..

Harry stared at her, unsure of what she wanted him to say. How the hell was he supposed to have all the answers? It wasn't like he'd woken up yesterday and thought, 'Gee, you know what would make my life great? Kissing Hermione! And then avoiding Ron like the plague! That sounds like great fun!' And now she was looking at him, all wide eyed and hopeful, and he could feel himself getting angry with her again, even though he wasn't even all that angry with her, per say.

"Harry," she sighed. With slight trepidation, she covered his hand with her hand. "Don't get angry with me. I'm not... I'm not upset about what happened." She smiled slightly. "I'm just a little over-analytical. I can't help trying to figure things out... even though not everything has an answer. Some things just are and you can't do anything about it. But if you try very hard to put up with me, I'll try very hard to put up with your mood swings."

He opened his mouth, clearly offended. "I don't have mood swings!"

She just gave him a pointed look.

"Most of the time anyway," he mumbled, slightly embarrassed. She smiled at him, and he was struck by the way her eyes were bleary from the lack of sleep, the way her hair was poorly brushed, matted and knotted on one side. But her face lit up with her smile, her tongue slightly protruding from behind her large front teeth. Why hadn't he ever noticed before how cute she was?

Then it struck him. "You think that I have mood swings? That you're afraid to tell me stuff because I might get angry?"

In response, Hermione leaned up and pecked him on the cheek, she followed that through with a crushing hug. "No, I think you're perfect," she whispered in his ear.

Harry felt a pool of warmth spread throughout his body in response to her words. He hugged her back, enjoying the way that she felt in his arms. At the sound of footsteps approaching the hall, they broke

quickly apart like a gunshot had gone off. Hermione turned her head towards her coffee mug and Harry went back to picking at his toast.

The room got louder as the rest of the school filed into the hall for breakfast. Ron slid across from them, looking sourly. There were dark rings under his eyes and he was giving off clear 'Don't TALK to ME!' vibes. Harry breathed a silent sigh of relief. He wouldn't have known what to say to his friend if he'd been up for a chat.

"Oh, swell. Burned toast." Ron picked un-enthusiastically at the toast that had shown up on a plate in front of him. "They went soft on the butter, as usual."

"Well, Ron, I'd like to see you try and butter hundreds of pieces of toast. In fact, I'd like to see you after a few days of slavery!"

Harry had to cover his face with his sleeve to hide his smirk. He didn't do it quick enough, though, because Ron caught his eye and scowled. "House Elves are happy Hermione! They like what they're doing. Trying to give them clothes is about the worst way to treat them, I reckon."

Hermione took a sip of her coffee, setting it back down rather quickly when she realized that it had become rather cold. "So says the white, male, wizard. Not everyone is as privileged as you, Ron."

"And not everyone is as snitty as you, Hermione!"

Hermione glared at him. Ron glared back. Harry sighed and went back to munching on his toast. Hermione stood, gathered her books, and left without saying good-bye to either of them.

'And she says I'm moody,' Harry thought. Ron rolled his eyes at him. "What's her problem?"

"Well, you could try and stop jumping all over her," Harry muttered. "She's very..." he trailed off, not quite sure how to describe Hermione, exactly. "Sensitive?" he tried.

Ron narrowed his eyes at him. "Since when did you join her side? 'Sides, she started it." Then in a surprisingly good imitation of Hermione he said, "Why don't you try slavery, Ron?"

"You could try being a little nicer to her," Harry said quietly.

Ron looked insulted. "I'm nice! What's she expecting? Me to happily say, 'Why sure, I'd love to try slavery. Thanks a whole bunch!'"

Harry set down his fork and began picking up his books. "Whatever." And, following Hermione's earlier example, left without saying good-bye.

Ron stared after him, clearly dumbfounded. "I'm nice," he muttered again, vaguely wondering where his best friend went and whom he'd been replaced with. "Bloody weird, was what that was."

Sighing, Ron set down his utensils too and gathered up his books. Alone he trudged up to the Gryffindor common room. He found Harry standing in front of the fire, staring into the flames. Dropping his stuff with a low thud, Ron came to stand next to him.

"Everything okay, mate?" he asked uncertainly. "You seem, errr, a little bit more moodier than usual."

Harry felt his blood rise. "I'm not moody!"

"Yeah, okay. Whatever you say." Ron stared into the flames dubiously, realizing that something was going on, but not quite sure what that was. "I'll be nicer to her. I don't know why I'm so mean, sometimes. I think that I've just gotten so used to it that it's more habit now than actual intent. If anyone else ever said some of the things I've said to her..."

"You'd make them eat slugs?" Harry suggested with a wry grin.

"For instance," Ron deadpanned.

"For what it's worth," Harry said softly. "I know she doesn't like jumping down your throat very much either."

"Yeah. That helps."

They stared into the flames for a while. Harry tried to come up with the best way to say that her and Hermione were... well... with... together. "Ron," he began hesitantly. "There's something that I... well, something that Hermione and I need to tell you."

Ron groaned. "Oh, don't tell me that you're worried about my N.E.W.T.'s scores for next year, too! Mom, Dad, even Fred and George send me owls every once and a while just to make sure that I'm really panicked about it. Though, I think Fred and George only do it because they have a vague hope I might explode or something. Sometimes I'm afraid Hermione's head will roll around and fall off when she really gets going about them."

Harry, who'd been subject to more than a few Hermione N.E.W.T.'s lectures, could sympathize. "No, she hasn't gotten me yet."

"Good." Sudden fear crept in his eyes, "You're not joining S.P.E.W., are you?"

"No! Ron..."

"You like Divination and Potions!"

"Ron... what the hell are you blithering about???"

"You started out with a bad news tone!"

"I did not!"

"You did! Whenever someone says the words 'we need to talk' it's never good. And if it isn't N.E.W.T.'s and it isn't S.P.E.W...."

"Then it had to be Divination and Potions?" Harry finished.

Ron thought about it and winced. "Good point."

"Besides!" Harry continued. "I didn't say 'we need to talk' I said 'we have something to tell you'!"

Ron still looked uncertain. "Well, what is it then?"

Harry suddenly felt a little bit queasy. 'Hermione and me... we're uh, well, I guess you could say... we're together. You know. An item. Me and Hermione. Don't worry, though. You're still our best friend.' Umm, no. Harry bit his lip and blurted out, "We really think you've improved this year as Keeper! We just wanted to make sure you knew that."

Ron blushed all the way to the tips of his ears, but Harry could tell that he was delighted by the compliment. It only succeeded, however, in giving him a small stomachache.

Harry was quiet all the way up to the Divination's classroom. Not just because it was Divination, but because he suddenly had no idea what to say to his best friend. Every time he thought he had landed on a nice, comfortable easy topic, his face would heat up and he'd start thinking about what he wasn't telling Ron, and then he'd imagine Ron's reaction if he actually knew the truth... and Harry was afraid that it was going to be a really long day.

Ron, on the other hand, didn't stop talking all the way up to Trelawney's attic. Harry's compliment about his Quidditch improvements seemed to make him forget all about his spat with Hermione at breakfast. It at least made Harry's job slightly easier.

"And then Percy sends Mom this letter, same condescending self. He actually has the gall to tell her that it was Dumbledore's fault for keeping You-Know-Who's reappearance so hush, hush. Stupid git. Of course, then Mom starts blubbing ALL over the counter. It's horrible when women cry, isn't it?"

Harry, remembering what happened with Hermione the other night, nodded in sympathy.

Ron actually shivered slightly at the thought. "Anyway. I don't think things are going to be mended anytime soon. I don't want to see

Percy again, after what he put us all through. I hope he feels mighty bad for a while, it might do him some good."

"It probably won't change him any." Harry reflected darkly. "People go to great lengths to make themselves believe they're in the right."

Ron looked a little awed. "Wow," he muttered. "That was like... when did you become so philosophical?"

"Philosophic what?" Harry repeated, not quite able to look him in the eye. Thankfully, they had reached the Divination's room and, with a sigh of relief, Harry sunk into his normal cushion.

With slight horror he suddenly realized that this was Divination. He had appearances to keep up. He had to... he had to look at Ron and laugh and pretend like everything Trelawney said was a great load of rubbish. His stomach sank when Ron gave him a gleeful grin. Harry tried to grin in return, but it came out as more of a grimace. With some trepidation, he sank down further into his cushion, wishing that he was invisible.

An hour later, Harry felt like he had run a marathon. It was painful, sitting there and pretending to be happy when really all he wanted to do was go back in time and hit himself in the back of the head for even contemplating kissing Hermione. 'Great move,' he thought, slightly depressed. 'Not only do I have a,' Harry blanched, 'a... a... girlfriend, but I may no longer have a best friend.'

Slightly less happy about the prospect of him and Hermione (bloody hell! Girlfriend! Hermione! Girlfriend!), Harry walked grumpily into Transfiguration. His grumpiness lasted all of about 30 seconds when he caught sight of Hermione, grinning stupidly at him, and giving him a slightly more adoring look than she had just yesterday. Grinning back, Harry stopped short and Ron banged into him from behind.

Ron let out a yelp of surprise. "What the hell are you doing?" he demanded.

"I'm, uh... just remembered, I never finished that essay last night."

Ron looked at him quizzically. "But you and Hermione were at it practically all night! How can you not be finished?"

Oh. God. Harry felt his stomach turn over. "I... uh... we... uh..."

Having reached Hermione, she quickly interjected her own explanation. "He wanted extra help with his Potions homework and didn't want you to know about it," she answered primly. "We sort of... forgot about the Transfiguration essay."

"Forgot? Forgot? How could you have forgotten???" Ron was staring at Hermione like she had grown a second head.

Harry coughed slightly, hoping to distract Ron. "So... how about that Quidditch team?"

"Which one?"

"I don't know!" Harry replied with some frustration. "Anyone! Pick one! I don't care! How are they?"

Ron's eyes were jumping back and forth between Harry and Hermione like he was watching a ping-pong match. "You two have gone mad." Apparently satisfied with that answer, he sat down in the seat next to Hermione... at the same time that Harry made a move to sit in the same spot.

They banged foreheads and jumped apart, rubbing at them. Hermione gave Harry a warning glare. Harry found that his throbbing forehead prevented him from caring.

Ron was shooting daggers at Harry with his eyes. "What is wrong with you today?" he snapped, taking the seat next to Hermione.

Feeling quite glum again, Harry plopped down next to him. "I'm worried about the essay," he lied. Again. His head throbbed in tune with his stomach and his forehead. Lying to his best friend was exhausting work.

Transfiguration turned out to be worse than Divination. Ron kept shooting him confused looks every so often, while Hermione refused to look at him at all. Professor McGonagall made sure that everyone was aware that he didn't have an essay to hand in, and he failed miserably at turning his quill into a fork.

By the end of class, he felt like he'd ran another marathon. Keeping up with his bad luck, Professor McGonagall called out, "I'd like a word after class, Potter" before he could escape.

Feeling ill, Harry reluctantly walked up to her desk. He was surprised to find that Hermione went up with him. Professor McGonagall looked equally surprised.

"I believe," she said, "that I asked to see Mr. Potter, not Miss Granger."

"Please, Professor, if this is about Harry's essay, then I think that I should be allowed to stay."

Professor McGonagall looked a little taken aback, but didn't object. Harry couldn't help but beam at her, never before admiring her talent for handling authority with finesse like he did now.

"Very well, Granger," Professor McGonagall said impatiently, "if you have something to say then out with it."

Hermione cleared her throat, clasped her hands behind her back, and raised her chin. "Harry was having emotional difficulties writing the essay, as they reminded him of the events of last year. Seeing how effected he was by being forced to contemplate this particular aspect of his godfather, I encouraged him to not write the essay, as I didn't think the educational benefits outweighed the emotional impact."

Harry stared at her, pretty sure that he hadn't really understood a word she'd said, but very impressed with it, nonetheless. Professor McGonagall weighed Hermione's words carefully. "We are often forced to contemplate things that we do not want to, why should Mr. Potter get special consideration in this manner?"

Hermione looked her in the eye and lost all pretences of trying to be calm and reasoning. "Because Harry's hurting, and if you cared at all about him, you wouldn't make him do something that would add to that hurt!"

Both Harry and Professor McGonagall were taken aback by her words. Harry continued to stare at her with open-mouthed appreciation, while McGonagall looked like she didn't quite know how to respond.

Harry, realizing that he hadn't yet said anything in his own defence, stared at the floor and cleared his throat. "I made a choice, Professor. I knew what I was doing. Hermione only helped to convince me."

Professor McGonagall sighed. "Harry, look at me."

Harry looked up, surprised at being addressed by his first name.

She gave him a tight smile. "I do care, perhaps too much, which is why I asked for an explanation in the first place." She gathered up the stacks of parchments, and seemed to think things over. "I can't, in good faith, give you credit for this assignment when everyone but you handed something in. I can, however, tell you that I think that you made the right choice, and that this won't hold you back." Holding the stack of parchment, she disappeared into her office.

Harry, feeling very tired all of a sudden, was surprised when Hermione grabbed his hand and tugged him out of the classroom. "Well, that went well," she said cheerfully.

"It... did?"

Hermione gave him a disgruntled look, pulling him along to the grand hall. "Yes, she basically told you that you earned more respect from her by not doing the assignment than by doing it."

"She... did?"

"Uh huh. And then she told you you'd earn bonus points for that. So! How was Divination?"

Harry felt a little dizzy. Realizing that she was pulling him towards the Great Hall, he stopped her. "I don't want to eat with everyone else. Can we just... go back to the common room and eat alone?"

"Sure," Hermione said, looking at him in concern. "I'll get us some food. You can head up there if you want." Giving him a quick peck on the cheek, she hurried off.

Harry watched her go, his cheek tingling where her lips had just been. He blinked, suddenly realizing that he was falling very hard, very fast. He suddenly wished that he had someone to talk to. What the hell did he know about being a boyfriend? A sudden fear crept over him, what the hell did he know about girls? He desperately wished he could talk to Ron, mentally hearing his friend's response in his head.

"They're all a bunch of loons, Harry. Can't trust any of them. Hot one minute, cold the next, and then they start crying on you! Don't make one ounce of sense!"

Feeling guilty again, Harry walked slowly up to the Gryffindor common room. It was blissfully empty, as everyone was down eating lunch. He didn't have to wait long for Hermione to show up, carrying plates of food. He didn't have the heart to tell her that he wasn't at all hungry.

Seeing his miserable expression, she sat down next to him. Harry tried to force himself to eat, chewing and swallowing without really thinking about it, but not tasting anything.

"It's Ron, isn't it?" Hermione finally said quietly.

Harry nodded. "I've lied to him more in the past few hours than in the last five years of our friendship. It's more difficult than I thought it would be. Every time I try to tell him... I can't."

"I know, me neither."

"And sometimes, I look at him and I can feel it bursting inside me because I want to tell him so bad. But when he looks at me, I can't

help it, I lie because I'm too worried that he'll be angry." Harry paused, a part of his mind sharply reminding him of the prophecy Dumbledore revealed to him last year. "I don't know what I'd do if Ron stopped talking to me."

Hermione nodded gravely. Harry realized, with yet more guilt, that he hadn't yet told her about Dumbledore's prophecy, either. She seemed to sense his slight panic, however, because she gripped his hand reassuringly. "He might be upset, but I don't believe that he'd stay that way forever."

Harry pondered her quietly for a moment. The way her eyes looked at him with understanding, but not pity and the way she seemed completely focused on him, hurting with him, and wanting to make things better for him. Harry wasn't sure if anyone had ever really cared like that about him before.

"You were brilliant today against McGonagall," he told her, some pride leaking into his voice.

She smiled warmly. "Clearly being with a smart witch has its benefits."

Harry cupped her cheek and shook his head. "You're not just smart. You're also caring, and funny, and really, really pretty." Harry blushed all the way through it, but considering the way Hermione was beaming at him, he thought he may have finally said something right.

Hermione looked a little flustered, but glowed with pleasure. He looked into her wide eyes and something loud and roaring in his mind yelled at him to kiss her! Kiss her, you dolt! Leaning forward, he captured her mouth with his own.

The kiss was tenderer than their first and a little more desperate. Her lips were soft, her mouth warm and sweet. Harry was again overcome with a strong sense of safety and of being loved and protected. He deepened the kiss, trailing a hand through her hair and resting it at the base of her neck.

When they pulled away, he left his forehead leaning against hers, listening to their ragged breathing. Hermione kept her eyes closed, seemingly still entranced. He smiled, playing with the tips of her hair.

When the door to the common room swung open and footsteps echoed down the hall towards them, Hermione's eyes flew open and they dived apart. Harry scrambled for the remains of his lunch, and Hermione quickly opened a book, pretending to be busily reading. Her face was still slightly pink, and Harry realized he was having a hard time controlling his breathing.

It was Ron. He peered at them curiously, but not really noticing that they were all alone in the common room. "I've been waiting down in the Great Hall for ages! What are you doing?"

Hermione yelped out, "Helping Harry with his potions homework!" at the exact same time that Harry cried, "Hermione wanted to read, um, a book!"

Ron stared at them, his mouth hanging open. He seemed unable to make any kind of noise. Harry couldn't really blame him.

"We, uh, wanted to read and study for Potions," Harry said, his voice taking on a hopeful note. 'Please, please let him just accept it... please let him just accept it...'

Ron closed his mouth, but continued to stare at them like he was suddenly unable to comprehend them. "What the bloody hell is going on with the lot of you?" he demanded, sounding thoroughly confused.

Harry glanced over at Hermione, hoping that her smart brain would allow her to come up with something. Instead, he was horrified to see that she was reading her book upside down. He widened his eyes at her, but she was so focused on reading her upside down book that she didn't notice.

Harry resisted groaning in frustration. Ron was still looking at him like he was a fascinating new strain of insect. However, deciding that they'd obviously just eaten something weird at breakfast, Ron

plopped down between them. "Oh joy. Potions next. Can't wait for that one."

Harry nodded glumly. Having just scraped by his O.W.L. in Potions the previous year, he was only taking it because it was required in order to become an Auror.

Ron frowned. "How's your book Hermione?"

"Oh, just great! Very inspiring! Thanks!" she replied breathlessly.

"You know... you're, uh, reading it upside down..."

Hermione hurriedly turned it right side up, shooting Harry a 'why didn't you tell me glare?' as she did so. He tried to give her a 'I did, but you didn't realize it!' glare in return, but he was pretty sure she didn't get the message.

It managed to confuse Ron, though. Further.

Uncertain now, he sounded a little bit more serious when he said, "Are you two sure you're feeling okay?"

Hermione set her book down slowly. "No, we're not. Ron... there's something I... something we need to tell you."

Harry shot Hermione a panicked look. She wanted to do it now?! But he wasn't prepared! He wanted a nice quiet lunch with his girlfriend (girlfriend!), not a gut-wrenching heart-to-heart talk with Ron. He was starting to feel queasy again.

Ron just grinned at Hermione. "It's okay, 'Mione. I already know. Harry told me."

Now Harry shot Ron a panicked look. He certainly had not! Unless he was yelling things out in his sleep again... but no, Ron would have brought it up and...

"Harry did what?" Hermione said in a low accusatory tone.

"I didn't!" Harry protested weakly. "I don't know what he's talking about!"

Ron grinned. "Aww, come off it, Harry. You spilled the beans this morning."

Hermione sent Harry such a livid gaze that he was afraid he'd start melting. "I didn't," he tried again, in a weaker tone.

Ron clapped him on the back. "It's okay, mate. I can listen to Hermione praise me about my keeping skills, too. Good for a man's pride."

It took Harry a full 10 seconds to register what Ron had just said. When it finally hit him, he felt weak with relief. "Oh... I did tell you that... I remember now..." Hermione looked like she wasn't quite sure what language he was speaking. Harry hastened to explain, his voice booming out much louder than he'd intended. "I told Ron this morning how much better we thought he was playing. Really big improvements over last year." As an afterthought he added, "Sorry, I didn't wait so we could tell him together."

"Oh, right," Hermione said, a little weakly. "It's, well... I suppose that's okay."

"Great!" Ron cried happily. "You guys are the best!"

Hermione and Harry shared matching, guilty looks. Much chipper than he'd been earlier, Ron disappeared to get his Potions stuff from his dorm.

Harry let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. His head was throbbing again.

"We have to tell him soon," Hermione said fearfully. "I don't know how much longer I can go on like this."

"How much longer you can go on like this?" Harry cried, suddenly really irritated with her. "How about me! I sleep in the same bedroom as him, you know! And it makes talking to him really difficult!"

Hermione re-coiled a little at the anger in his voice. "I'm his friend, too." She whispered.

"Yeah," Harry snapped moodily, grabbing his stuff. "The way you guys carry on, it's real obvious!" Stomping out of the common room, Harry realized he was going to be about five minutes early for Potions.

He sighed. He was living in the longest day ever.

TBC

Potions class seemed to drone on. Harry knew he should be listening to what Snape was saying, but every time he tried to focus, he found himself immediately drifting off again. Paying attention in Snape's class was extra important, the man loved to find any excuse to incriminate and punish Harry. Not to mention the fact that his workload always seemed to be twice as hard as everyone else's, no matter what he did.

After trying futilely to take notes, Harry gave up and hoped that he'd be able to copy Hermione's after class. That was, if she was still talking to him. He was sitting between her and Ron, and the only thing she'd said to him since entering had been a frosty "hello." Harry admitted that he'd probably deserved it.

Great. They hadn't even been together for a complete day and he was already treating her like his own personal punching bag for his mood swings. That thought made him feel guiltier and he stared hard at the sheet of unfinished notes in front of him. Squished between Ron and Hermione only reminded him of what a bad friend (And boyfriend! Boyfriend!) he'd been to them the last little while.

He was surprised when he felt a piece of parchment slide under his elbow. Frowning, he glanced quickly up to make sure that Snape wasn't in the vicinity before pulling it out from under him. Reading it made his heart speed up and his mouth feel slightly dry.

I'm sorry I upset you, Harry. I didn't mean to. We're both in this together, okay? Please don't be mad at me... I don't think I can take it right now.

Hermione

He snuck a quick glance at her. She was busily copying down every word Snape was saying and didn't so much as twitch in his direction. Despite that, however, Harry found himself wondering just how much attention she was actually paying to class. Sneaking a look at Snape, he wrote:

I'm not mad at you. I'm sorry I was so short with you. You're right, we are in this together.

As an afterthought he added:

P.S.: I don't think it's even possible for me to stay mad at you.

Feeling like he was back on equal ground with Hermione, and had managed to say something boyfriendly, Harry felt his spirits rise. Taking a quick glance for Snape, Harry followed Hermione's lead and slipped the note under her elbow.

He stared back down at his parchment and quill, but was really watching Hermione for movement. He glanced at her when he saw her pull the note out from her elbow, and could swear he saw the corners of her mouth turn up into a smile.

A few minutes later, Harry felt the parchment slip back under his elbow. A little more eager now, he quickly made sure that Snape was in a corner of the room before pushing it in front of him. Pushing his glasses up his nose, he read:

Honestly, Harry. We both know you're more than capable of holding a grudge.

Harry blushed, but he had to admit that she had a point. He kept reading.

But it was sweet. And I just wanted to say that... me, too. Obviously, not the grudge part, but about what you really meant by it.

Harry felt his face heat up. What had he meant by it? How was it that girls could make such a big deal out of the simplest of phrases? Trying desperately to figure out what Hermione was talking about, he wrote back something that he hoped would at least sound right.

Yeah, I know what you mean. (Harry resisted the urge to snort.) Besides, hasn't anyone ever told you that you're really cute when you're frustrated? Your eyes get all narrow and your hands shake slightly... it's really very endearing.

Harry slipped the piece of parchment back under Hermione's elbow. Then, deciding that he should at least pretend to be making notes, tried to focus on what Snape was saying.

"Goslum is very dangerous in its liquid form, however mixed with water it has many beneficial properties. It allows Healers to perform many operations which would have been difficult, if not impossible, only decades ago..."

Harry found himself drifting again. He glanced at Ron, who was actually trying to take notes. Harry felt slightly relieved. At least he would have someone's notes to get. Even if Ron's notes were hardly ever detailed as Hermione's they were still better than nothing. It was assuming, however, that he and Ron would continue being on speaking terms in the future. Harry felt his stomach bottom out, thinking again about the reel of lies he'd concocted over the last 24 hours.

Besides, he reflected, would Ron even take the news all that badly? He'd never really shown any interest in Hermione. Sure he got jealous fairly easily, but just because he and Hermione were going out didn't mean that they were leaving Ron behind or anything. And, okay, Ron had never particularly liked Viktor Krum much, but that was mostly because Ron thought he was grumpy and surly and...

Harry straightened up in his chair. Krum was grumpy and surly! Hermione had just told him that morning that he was moody most of the time, too. What if Hermione was only showing interest in him because he reminded her of Krum? In which case, would it upset Ron?

Harry sank down again, feeling the familiar queasy sensation return with a vengeance in the pit of his stomach. He was being stupid. He and Krum were nothing alike.... Harry, with sudden panic realized that he and Krum played the same Quidditch position, too! When Hermione slipped the parchment under his elbow, Harry made a wild dive for it, desperate for any kind of reassurance.

Oh, Harry, don't be ridiculous.

Ridiculous? Who was being ridiculous? Harry had a sudden fear that everything he would say to her from now on would go into that spot in girls' minds that analyzed and over-analyzed things. It only increased his queasiness. Palms slightly sweaty, he read on:

Of course, I could say that you look cute when you're furious, moody and grumpy, but it sounds a little clichéd. The truth is...

Harry sent her a dirty look. Clichéd? Now she was calling him clichéd??? He was just trying to be sweet!

The truth is that you look cute pretty much all the time, anyway. Of course, judging by all the stares you're constantly getting, you probably already knew that. But I just wanted... I just wanted to tell you that.

Harry looked up again, grinning despite himself, feeling slightly exuberant. This wasn't so hard. All he had to do was say some sappy things, then she would say them back, and then his stomach would do that little flip-flop fling, and...

"Paying close attention in class, aren't we, Potter?"

Harry felt tendrils of horror creep into his belly. With trepidation, he turned his head, finding Snape staring right over his shoulder and... and... Harry's heart sped up and he rushed to grab him and Hermione's note, to tear it up, to eat it, to do anything to keep it away from Snape. Unfortunately, Snape knew exactly what he was doing and, with a slight flick of his wand, summoned the piece of parchment right into his waiting hand.

Hermione went perfectly still beside him. Harry had a moment of worry where he was afraid that she had stopped breathing or something. His own breath was coming out heavy enough to make up for both of them.

Snape read over the note silently as the rest of the class watched it with hungry eyes. A large smirk crept over his face as he read it, and Harry felt his face heat up to burning levels. When he was done, he met Harry's gaze, a sick grin plastered on his face.

"Mr. Potter, I find myself unsurprised by your complete lack of any kind of attempt in my classroom, despite your abysmal grades. However," Snape's sick grin, if even possible, was actually widening, "Miss Granger, I'm surprised that with your pompous amount of knowledge, you would not only encourage this kind of unparticipation, but begin it, as well."

"What does it say, Professor?" Malfoy called out gleefully from the back of the room, clearly overjoyed at seeing Harry in such an embarrassing position.

"Are you two mad?" Ron whispered, out of the corner of his mouth. "Passing notes in Potions???"

Harry couldn't look at him. He could barely breathe, as it was, despite the large intakes of air he was taking.

"Why, Malfoy, I would be delighted to read Potter's note." Clearing his throat, Snape began, "'I'm sorry I upset you, Harry. I didn't mean to...'"

Harry stood up so hard he knocked his chair backwards. He was shaking so badly that he could barely get out his angry words. "You have no RIGHT to read THAT! That's PRIVATE!"

Malfoy roared with laughter in the back of the room. "Personal is it, Potter?" he called out. The Slytherins all snickered.

Snape was watching Harry with a look of high amusement. "Sit down, Potter." His eyes glinted, his face leering and sinister. "It would give me the greatest pleasure to assign you detention."

Harry had a moment where he envisioned himself leaping over the table, hitting Snape with a curse, and taking his and Hermione's note and running. The moment broke when Hermione tugged on his robes.

"Sit down, Harry," she said, sounding almost resigned. "This won't help any."

He sat, but continued to feel the anger pulse through him. Snape continued on with the note, and Harry stared straight ahead, pretending not to hear the bursts of laughter coming from the back of the room, and avoiding the slightly gleeful eyes shot in his direction.

"Please don't be mad at me... I don't think I can take it right now." Snape paused after every word, giving Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherins a chance to guffaw. Harry knew it was only going to get worse.

Hermione for her part, was sitting as ridged as a board next to him, muttering continually under her breath, "Please let class end, please let class end, please let class end..."

Harry thought that was awfully wishful thinking of her, seeing as though most people would probably gladly stay after the end of class to hear Snape read every last word of the note.

When Snape got to the part where Harry said Hermione was cute, he slowed down even further, drawing out each word. "Besides... hasn't... anyone... ever... told... you... that... you're... really... cute... when... you're... frustrated? You're... eyes," Snape pronounced the word 'eyes' in a low, baritone voice, "get... all... narrow... and... your... hands... shake... slightly... it's... really... very... endearing."

Malfoy yelled out from the back of the room. "Hermione Granger? Cute? You've gone mad, Potter."

Harry felt his blood boil. He jumped up, his hands clenched in fists at his sides. "Shut your trap!" he hollered at Malfoy. "YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO SAY THAT ABOUT HER!"

Snape looked extra please. "I believe that's the second time you've stood up in my classroom today to speak out of turn and without permission, Mr. Potter. 20 points from Gryffindor."

Groans from the Gryffindors could be heard throughout the room. "Nice going, Harry," they muttered. "Couldn't keep your hormones in check until after class, could you, Harry?"

Hermione tugged him down again. He was so angry with Snape that he wanted nothing better than to pull out his wand... and... and...

"Harry," Hermione whispered in his ear. "Please, just let him finish. It'll be okay."

Harry was pretty sure it was far from being okay. Snape was beginning to wind down, reading Hermione's last bit with more punctuated laughter from the Slytherins and groans and moans from the Gryffindors. Harry glanced at Ron. His red-haired friend was staring down at his tightly clasped hands and hadn't made so much as a sound since Snape began reading the note.

Harry felt guilt climb in on top of the anger. If there was any way that he wanted Ron to find out... it wasn't like this... it wasn't like this that he wanted anyone to find out.

Snape finished, ending with loud jeers and hoots from the Slytherin crowd, Malfoy in particular. "Potter, Granger, if I ever find either of you so much as writing a word that does not relate to Potions in my classroom again, let me assure you that your punishment will be much worse than slight public embarrassment. Class dismissed."

Most people got up eagerly, turning enthusiastically to their neighbour to discuss the newest gossip or to guffaw and laugh over it. Harry turned around to try and say something, anything to Ron that might salvage their friendship, but he'd already left.

"C'mon, Harry." Hermione said, pulling on his arm. She sounded shaky, and the hand on his arm was trembling slightly. It made him even angrier with Snape. He raised his eyes, meeting the Potions' Professor's gaze head-on. They looked at each other in intense, mutual dislike before Hermione managed to summon enough strength to pull Harry out of the room.

Out in the hall, Harry could feel everyone stopping to stare at them. News traveled quickly at Hogwarts and he knew that it would only be a matter of time before everyone in the wizarding community knew

that 'The Boy Who Lived' had a girlfriend. The thought made him feel ill.

Hermione continued to tug him along, murmuring, "Ignore them, ignore them, ignore them..."

"It's rather hard when everyone's staring at you like you've suddenly sprouted green wings or something!" he muttered back.

Hermione stopped, glaring at him. "Well, I know it's difficult, Harry, but we did sort of bring it onto ourselves."

"Any other teacher would have thrown the note out and given us a warning. But nooooo... good old Snape... can't let anything good actually happen in my life..."

"Harry, get over it!" she cried, rather loudly, and people already listening leaned forward in anticipation. Hermione lowered her voice. "We have to find Ron. He's the one who's going to be most bothered. We have to find him now, before he hears anything else."

"Fat chance of that happening." Harry sighed, seeing the intense look of worry on Hermione's face. "Look, I'm sure he just needs to cool down or something. We can't force him to talk to us. We'll bring it up when the time is right."

"Harry... I don't want... I don't want anything to happen to... to break the friendship we all share...."

Now Harry was tugging her along. "Hermione, nothing's going to happen! Can we just get out of here???"

Hermione pulled herself out of his grasp. "Well I'm going to look for him!" she cried, apparently forgetting that they had a large audience.

"Fine!" he yelled back. People looked positively gleeful at the sight of them beginning to argue. "STOP STARING AT US!"

Hermione leaned closer to him. "Harry, kiss me," she said, quietly.

"What?" he asked, taken completely off-guard. "Now? Here? Are you mad?"

"Just do it!" she hissed. "Because then, at least, people won't be talking about what a large scene we made by yelling at each other."

"But then... then... they'll be talking about..." Harry couldn't even get the words out, the idea was too horrifying.

"I know," she said crossly. "But... oh, to hell with it." Leaning up, she pressed her lips to his, held them there for a second, before turning around and rushing off.

Harry stared at her retreating back, completely forgetting about his audience, and feeling that same baffled feeling of contentment rise in him. The moment was ruined, however, when Malfoy called out, "Hope you were using a breath mint, Potter!"

Harry scowled, ignored him, and trudged up to his dorm, hoping against hope that he'd be able to get some private time there.

TBC

Alone in his dorm room, Harry pulled the shades, drew the curtain around his four-poster bed, and, fully clothed, covered himself with his blanket. The silence and darkness of the room was almost worse than the loud stares in Hogwarts' halls. However, it suited his mood perfectly, and he remained in bed, scowling up at the ceiling.

He was beginning to regret ever kissing Hermione in the first place, again. Now he had obligations and expectations. He was no longer just her best friend. Suddenly, everything he said, every way he acted had some kind of a newfound meaning that he didn't quite understand.

And things didn't seem to be going so well on the Ron front. Harry's head began to pound again as he was faced with the very real consequences of what this meant for his and Ron's friendship. Well, he would just have to stay there until Ron came up to bed. He and Ron had fought before and things always righted themselves in the end. Resolute, Harry continued to stare at the darkened ceiling, wondering exactly what he would tell Ron when he finally confronted him.

He felt himself drift off, his eyes closing themselves from pure, overworked, emotional exhaustion. Rolling onto his side, some part of Harry's mind reminded him that he should probably be doing homework, while the other part was more than happy to go to sleep and leave all his problems behind...

Harry felt like he had barely drifted off when something long and sharp jabbed him in his ribs. His first thought was that Ron was so angry he was trying to kill him. This idea startled him so much that Harry jumped up, grabbed his wand, and turned stone-faced to meet his attack... "Neville?"

Neville squeaked and took a step back, tripping on his robes and falling to the floor in a heap. "H-Harry... hi..."

Harry squinted at him, and groped for his glasses, which had fallen off his nose and lay on the bed beside him. "What's going on?"

Neville stood, looking nervous. "Well, I have a message from Hermione..."

"Hermione, huh?" Harry interrupted. "Can't come up and tell me herself, can she? No... wouldn't want to risk another argument with Harry..."

Neville stared at him uncertainly. Finally, looking a little abashed, he said. "I'm sorry I woke you."

Harry, suddenly realizing that Neville was probably the last person who deserved his temper, tried to take in a deep breath. "So... a message from Hermione?" he asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

Neville looked a little uncertain. "Well, she says that she really wants to talk to you and... and that you're not treating her very nicely. She, um, she also said that you were a coward for hiding up in your room."

Harry stood up so fast that his blanket tumbled to the floor. "She said what?"

Neville took a step backwards. "Erm... she also said that you shouldn't get angry with me because I'm just the messenger."

Though he was right, Harry still felt furious. "She thinks I'm a coward?" he yelled. "She's the one sending you to deliver her messages!"

Neville set his face in a resolute frown. "Don't be angry with me, Harry, but I think she's right." Off Harry's livid gaze, Neville seemed to become more determined. He hurried on to say, "Hermione should get the best, and if you're just going to abandon her to both Ron and the rest of the school, then you don't deserve her."

Harry could do nothing but stare open-mouthed at him, partly because Neville had just told him off, and partly because he suspected that he was right. Neville had backed up so much, his back was now pressing against the wall on the opposite side of the room. Maybe he wasn't good enough for Hermione. It wasn't like he was

purposely trying to hurt her, it was more that he hadn't the slightest idea what he was doing.

Neville, seeing the change in Harry's expression, let out a little sigh of relief. "Just go down and talk to her, Harry."

Harry nodded glumly and slowly took the stairs down to the Gryffindor common room. Halfway there he stopped suddenly, remembering that his hair and clothes were rumpled from his midday nap. Suddenly self-conscious, Harry almost ran all the way back up to his dorm room to fix it, before realizing that he'd probably never come back out if he did. Groaning, he realized that this was just one more thing he wouldn't have worried about 24 hours ago.

He found Hermione in the Gryffindor common room, curled up in a chair near the fire, a large number of textbooks propped up on her lap. She was taking notes feverishly with her parchment and quill, as the tip of her tongue poked out from the corner of her mouth. There was a small plate of food on the table next to her and Crookshanks was curled in a ball at her feet.

Harry, staring at her, felt the last remnants of his anger disappear, and yet more guilt work its way into his stomach. His head still pounding, he headed over to her, feeling the gaze of everyone in the room on the back of his head. He stopped in front of her, and cleared his throat.

She finished with her sentence before putting her book down and staring up at him. Her face registered surprise. "Harry! I didn't think you'd come down."

"You called me a coward," he said, in a half-whine/half-hurt voice, mortified as he did so.

She summoned up a seat with a wave of her hand and he sank into it gratefully. "Well, if there was one thing I knew would get you down here, it was your ego."

"You think I have an ego?"

Hermione didn't answer. Instead she picked up the plate of food next to her and thrust it at him. "Here. Eat."

"You... you brought me dinner?"

She looked at him in annoyance. "Of course I did. You barely ate anything for breakfast or lunch and slept right through dinner."

Harry was touched, despite himself. He still had that sick, queasy feeling in his stomach, though. The thought of food only made him feel sicker. In a quiet voice he said, "Hermione, I think there's something wrong with me."

She peered at him, a little bit of worry creeping into her eyes. "Did something happen?"

He shook his head. "I've just been feeling really sick all day. My stomach hurts and I feel a little bit like I might throw up. My head is pounding so hard I can barely see straight. And my forehead still hurts where I hit Ron earlier."

To his surprise, Hermione burst out laughing. She clutched at her stomach, sending her books (and Crookshanks) flying. "Oh, Harry..." she said between giggles.

"What?" he demanded, an edge creeping into his voice. "WHAT'S SO FUNNY?"

His anger only made her laugh harder. "Oh, Harry..." she gasped. "I adore you... so much..."

"You... you adore me?" He felt that same pleasurable warm feeling wash over him, temporarily overshadowing the ache in his stomach and head.

She finally managed to get her giggles under control, but continued to sit there, grinning at him in amusement.

Harry, for his part, was more than a little confused. How could she tell him she adored him while clearly laughing at something he'd said?

She handed him the plate of food again. "Eat it, Harry. You won't throw up, I promise."

"So you know what's wrong with me, then?"

She clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle another giggle and nodded.

"Well, what is it?" he asked testily.

"Harry, you've faced Voldemort four times since coming to Hogwarts, you spend your summers with an aunt and uncle who starve and abuse you, and you play a game that requires flying around in the air at high speeds while balls zoom around trying to kill you. But the idea of a relationship terrifies you."

Harry stared at her for a moment, letting her words sink in. It did make a certain amount of sense. His various aches had really only started in the morning when news of their... erm... togetherness, had finally sunk in. Actually, now that it was so painfully obvious,

Harry could already feel his headache ebbing and his stomach beginning to settle. And he was hungry. Taking the plate, he began to munch thoughtfully.

"Maybe it terrifies me a little," he said, his mouth full of food. He swallowed, continuing to think on it. "I mean, there's all these rules I suddenly have to follow. And I don't... I don't really understand any of them..."

"Harry, it's really not that bad. Besides, it's just me. It should make things easier. God knows, with everything I've already put up from you, you could stand to relax a little. And, anyway, didn't you sort of go through this last year with Cho?"

Harry started choking and his eye twitched. "I'm not sure if you noticed," he hissed, "but that didn't really end on the best of terms."

"Well, she still shoots you these glances every now and again, like it's only a matter of time before she gets you back."

Harry, who had never sensed any such thing from Cho, just gave her a look. It took him two more mouthfuls of food before he realized. Hermione was jealous. The feeling made him feel slightly gleeful despite himself.

Trying to sound interested he said, "Really? She still going out with that bloke What's His Name?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "It's not going to work, Harry."

"What's not going to work?" he asked, between mouthfuls.

"Making me think that you still like Cho. Because I know you don't." Hermione let it hang in the air for a few seconds before she added, more hesitantly, "Right?"

Harry grinned. "Well, since I'm so 'terrified' of relationships..."

Hermione poked him with her wand. "Harry!"

He just smiled innocently, feeling happier than he had all day. "It's okay, Hermione. I adore you, too."

They stared at each other stupidly for a few moments before Harry reminded himself why they had gotten into this situation to begin with. Clearing his throat, he shifted his eyes to the floor and muttered, "Have you talked to Ron?"

"No," she paused, her lips drawing into a tight line. "And I don't think it was very decent of you to run off on me like that."

He continued staring at the floor, trying desperately to come up with some justifiable excuse. He couldn't find one. "I'm sorry."

She sighed. "Well, it doesn't matter now. I didn't even look for him very long in all honesty. And maybe it would've been better to have

left and let the storm pass. People weren't particularly nice about... things."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean?"

She laughed uncomfortably. "You know, it's you, so people are bound to say things."

Harry looked at her, suddenly worried. "What did they say?"

Hermione stared down at her lap. "Harmless things mostly. A lot of people just wanted to acknowledge it and give us their best." She chewed her lip and tried to say nonchalantly. "Others would say I was too ugly, or not brave enough, or too mean to deserve you... however, I suspect that it's really just the beginning. One person, though, accused me of putting you under a love spell, since that would be the only way you would ever look twice."

"WHAT?" he yelped, jumping up and staring around the room suspiciously. "Who said that? Was it Malfoy? I'll rip his head off, I'll show him what looking twice really means!"

Hermione tugged on his robes. "Harry, it doesn't matter. It's just words."

His hands were shaking. He'd never even considered what kind of an impact his unwanted fame would have upon Hermione. "You don't deserve that," he said softly.

"I know, but.... Oh, I wish that you would just sit and talk to me rather than gallantly trotting off to enact revenge on anyone who's ever said anything mean to me. I mean, it's sweet and everything, Harry, but I don't really care all that much about what people say. So just..." she tugged on his robes again. "Sit down."

He sat, reluctantly. "Well, none of it's true!" he said in a loud voice. Everyone who wasn't already watching them turned their heads curiously. He gathered her hands and said in a lower voice, "You are brave, you do deserve me, you are not ugly, and you most certainly do not have to put a spell on me to make me like you! You're perfect!"

To Harry's complete and utter horror, Hermione's eyes filled with tears. He just said something good, why was it making her cry?"

"Erm, I'm sorry," he backpedaled. "I can, uh, take it back if you want."

She sniffled and threw her arms around his neck. "Don't take it back, Harry. That's exactly what I wanted to hear."

Suddenly very distracted by having her in his arms, he tried to concentrate. "Yeah... um... okay."

Harry had a momentary flash of panic when he was worried she was going to start crying all over him again, but she pulled away, wiping at her eyes with her sleeve. He missed her closeness, but suddenly felt self-conscious with so many eyes in the Gryffindor common room peering at them.

Then someone started clapping. The clapping was slowly followed by a loud whistle, followed by more clapping. Someone hollered out, "Way to go Harry!" More clapping ensued, followed by cheers and whistles. "Congratulations Hermione and Harry!" people called out. Soon the entire common room was alive with people standing up and cheering for them.

Harry shrank as down in his chair as far as he could, wanting desperately to disappear. What had he been thinking? Why had he left his dorm where he was all alone and safe and no one was staring at him and Hermione because... his stomach turned over... they were... they were....

"So what does it feel like to have a real girlfriend, Harry?" Someone, it sounded suspiciously like Dean Thomas, cried.

Harry, if possible, tried to shrink down even farther. Hermione didn't appear to notice, still flushed about his last compliment, and looking a little bit like she was enjoying the attention. Well, that was all fine and good. Harry was glad she was happy, but the last thing he needed was to give people another excuse to talk about him.

His head was pounding and his dinner felt suspiciously close to being yacked up all over the common room floor. Harry almost felt slightly justified, it would serve everyone right to have him barf all over them!

Finally Hermione noticed his discomfort and frowned at him. "Honestly, Harry, it's not like you're going to die or anything."

Harry was pretty sure his pounding head would disagree. "Well, that makes me feel better. Thanks."

The cheering finally died down and people turned back to what they'd been doing. Hermione still looked annoyed. "Harry, this is never going to work if you feel like running every time someone mentions that we're together!"

The ease at which she said the word 'together' nearly made him start choking. He took a deep breath and tried to sit up a little straighter. "I just wish that we could have kept it secret for a little longer."

"Well, we can't. Things are what they are and we'll deal with it."

"But it's not really fair, you know!" he burst out. "They know everything about me! I'm known all over the wizarding community! But this... this isn't fair, Hermione! This is private and people are acting as though..."

"As though it's the greatest thing since you last faced Voldemort?"

Harry nodded miserably.

Hermione sighed, but looked a little more sympathetic. "Look, it's not going to be easy. And I know... I can't understand what it feels like to be you. But you have to stop treating me like I don't understand what it feels like to be in this relationship. People are talking about me too, Harry. And most of it isn't exactly flattering." She fiddled with her books, stacking them on top of each other and added, more quietly. "But at this point, I care more about what Ron thinks than what anyone else does."

Harry felt himself grow cold at the mention of his friend's name. He was forced to admit that she was right. As usual. Ron was more important. He nodded grimly.

"Will you try and talk to him tonight?"

Harry nodded again.

Hermione stood up, gathering up her books. "Okay. I'll see you tomorrow." She paused before going up to the girls' dorms, clearly looking like she wanted to say something else.

Harry gave her an out. "I'm not that freaked out, you know."

Hermione smiled warmly. "You almost sound convinced. But... I need to know, Harry." She swallowed, beginning to look a little tearful again. Harry felt tingles of fear in his stomach. "Before this goes any further... I need to know. Are you sure, is this... what you want?"

Harry was quiet, contemplating her words. The last thing he ever wanted was to hurt her. But it looked like he'd hurt either way, as her boyfriend or as just her friend. But she asked him what he wanted. And Harry was finding it increasingly difficult to explain that he did want to be with her... it just made him slightly queasy to think about it, was all.

Instead of answering, he stood up, put his hands on her shoulders and, despite everyone in the loud common room, he kissed her. He pulled quickly away, his face burning, but hoping that she got the message.

She had. Her upper lip quivered, her eyes filling up with unshed tears, and she threw herself into his arms, gripping him around the neck. "Oh I'm so glad!" she whispered passionately. "I was so afraid... when you didn't answer... it will be okay, Harry... I know it will... because we're together... and you're stupid, but you care about me... and it's... it's okay..." She pressed her face against his chest, seemingly content on just staying in his arms.

Harry, instead of feeling panicky, instead felt sort of soothed to have her so close to him. She pressed her ear against his heart and let out a tiny sigh of contentment. Harry pressed a kiss to her forehead, deciding, once again, that maybe being a boyfriend wasn't too difficult, after all.

She pulled away, her eyes still shinning. "Good night."

He grinned, feeling slightly giddy. "Sleep well."

She squeezed his hand before gathering up her stuff and heading off. Harry watched her go, smiling despite himself. It really wasn't going to be so hard, after all...

"Hey Harry! Hermione, hmm? Gotta say, always thought she'd end up with Ron in the end, but I guess you got there first."

Harry was pulled out of his stupor by Dean Thomas who'd appeared at his elbow. Harry scowled. "Shut up."

"Oh, Hermione..." he said in a high, pitched voice. "You're so perfect and wonderful!"

Seamus Finiggan, overhearing, jumped in. "Oh, Harry! That was the most wonderfulest, beautifulest thing anyone's ever said to me!"

"SHUT UP!" Harry yelled.

Seamus and Dean dissolved into a fit of laughter so hard that they were rolling around on the floor, kicking and punching wildly. "Oh God..." Seamus gasped out between punctuated spurts of laughter. "Your face...."

"It was beautiful..." Dean added, continuing to thump the floor with his fist.

Harry had had more than enough. Shooting them a look that could melt glass, he went back up to his dorm room.

Alone at last, he let out a deep breath, sinking down onto his four poster bed. He heard a scuffle and looked up sharply, eyes alerting to him to the fact that he wasn't quite as alone as he'd hoped. Neville, who appeared to have stayed in the room after delivering Hermione's message, was staring bleakly out the window, resting his head on his hands. He let out a loud sigh when he saw Harry staring at him.

"Hi Harry..." he said in a melancholy voice.

Harry, who felt like he'd dealt with enough upset people in one afternoon, didn't quite know what to say. He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Erm, something bothering you?"

Neville cast him a look, as if trying to decide whether or not he was a suitable candidate to talk to. "I guess."

Harry waited, but Neville didn't seem any more forthcoming. "Is there... is there something you'd like to talk about?"

Neville sighed and nodded. "But I don't really think that you'd be the best person to talk to about it."

"Oh."

"It's about Hermione," Neville explained.

Harry, still utterly confused, repeated, "Oh." Then something finally clicked in his head, and he sat up quickly. "You... you... you..." Harry could barely get the words out. "You... you... like her... don't you?"

Neville nodded miserably again. "And now that she's going out with you, I'll never have a shot."

Harry suddenly found himself wishing he was still in the common room being tormented by Dean and Seamus. "You might still have a shot," Harry said, trying to sound comforting. "I mean, Hermione doesn't take a lot of stuff from most people and I don't know if you've noticed but... I haven't been, erm, exactly, that nice to her since we started going... out," he finished, uncomfortably.

Neville released another long, sad sigh. "Yeah, I guess." Not looking at all convinced, he continued to stare out the window. "You could have anyone Harry, why did it have to be Hermione?"

Harry wasn't quite sure what to say to that, so he kept his mouth shut.

Neville looked glum. "I don't mean it that way. It's just... girls love you, Harry. Even Hermione. And I know that she's never really noticed me, but she's always been really wonderful when I needed help and sometimes I thought that..." Neville trailed off, suddenly looking fearful. "Not that I would ever do anything to stop what you have with her..."

Harry got up and came to stand next to him. "She's really quite a handful," he said, quite truthfully. "Cries a lot, sort of sensitive about everything, you know? She's not that great."

"Yes, she is," Neville replied stubbornly.

Harry felt a sort of hollow feeling creep into his stomach. "Neville," he said desperately. "I'm sorry, I never wanted to hurt anyone. This sort of just happened..."

Neville gave a small smile. "Thanks for trying, Harry, it means a lot. Besides, if it wasn't you, it would have been Ron."

Harry's insides tightened up. "Why do people keep saying that?"

"Well, you know. He's always sort of liked her."

Harry's eyes widened with surprise. "He... he has?"

Neville looked unsettled. "I thought you knew. I mean, he's never said anything outright, but you spend so much time with the two of them that I thought that..."

"I would have noticed something like that?" Harry said hollowly. "Yeah, I would have thought so, too."

"I'm probably wrong," Neville said quickly. "I'm probably just imagining things, I do that a lot. Besides, you would know better than anyone."

Harry nodded, but his guilt over Ron returned with a vengeance. He tried to smile reassuringly. "Yeah, I would know."

Neville yawned, and finally turned to look Harry in the eye. "Is she very happy with you?"

"I don't... I don't really know...." Harry's stomach tightened up, reminding him painfully that Hermione had cried more in the last couple of days than in the last five years that he'd known her.

Neville stretched sleepily and climbed into bed. "Well, you better make her happy. I learned a lot of new tricks in DA last year."

Harry smiled despite himself. "You could take me anytime, Neville."

Neville nodded and rolled over, falling asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. Harry wished that it was that easy for him. Crawling into his own bed, he pretended to be asleep when Seamus and Dean came up, not wanting to witness any more of their highly unamusing impressions. When he heard their breathing slow and the sound of snoring fill the room, Harry sat up, sitting cross-legged on his bed and watching the door.

Vaguely he wondered where Ron was and how he was managing to get around the castle without being caught. He'd had far too many near disasters in the past, even with the invisibility cloak, to think Ron was having an easy time staying hidden.

It was during his wait that Harry realized, with a sinking stomach, that he hadn't done any of his homework. Resigning himself to the fact that he'd have to get up extra early the next morning, he checked the clock, surprised to find that it was nearing midnight. He yawned, willing his eyes to stay open. He had to talk to Ron. It didn't matter how tired he was, or how heavy his eyelids felt, or how much he wanted to roll over, close his eyes, and put it all away.

Just when his cement eyelids closed, he heard a door swing and shut. Jerking himself awake, he saw Ron's figure moving around in the darkness, putting on his pajamas. Harry shifted, and Ron froze, one leg in his pajama bottoms. Harry held his breath as Ron listened carefully into the darkness of the room. Shrugging it off, Ron finished changing, and went to get into bed.

Harry slid off his bed, and came to stand behind him. "Ron!" he whispered.

Ron jumped about five feet off the ground, giving out a small yelp as he did so. Whirling around, he quickly recognized the outline of Harry's body in the darkened room. His body going ridged, Ron turned back around and climbed into bed without acknowledging him.

"Ron..." Harry whispered frantically. "We need to talk."

In response, Ron rolled over, facing the wall.

"C'mon, Ron," he pleaded. "I know that you're hurt, but we can work it out... just... look... it's not what you think."

Finally, Ron answered. "Oh, it's not, is it?" he said, in a deathly, calm whisper. "I think that you and Hermione got together. But if that's not it, by all means, enlighten me."

Harry felt a slight edge of panic. "Okay, maybe it is what you think. But that doesn't mean anything, it doesn't mean that our friendship is any different, you're still our best friend Ron, and we've been worried all day about what you must be thinking..."

Ron took his pillow and hugged it to his ear, clearly intent on ignoring him.

Harry kicked one of the legs of the bed in frustration. Ron didn't so much as flinch. Neville rolled over and let out a small snort. Harry, not wanting to wake any of the others, climbed into his own bed, realizing that nothing was anywhere close to solved. Ron wouldn't talk to him. Hermione was suddenly his girlfriend. And Neville was wandering around looking like someone had murdered his puppy.

Harry was still awake when the sun rose the next morning, its yellow glow bathing the room in an earthly light. He stayed perfectly still, not planning on moving until Ron did. He didn't have to wait long. Harry closed his eyes when he saw movement in the next bed and heard Ron climb down, trying to be as quiet and stealthy as possible.

Unfortunately for Ron, that turned out to be nearly impossible. Whack! Ron let out a moan of pain and bent down, clutching at his toe, letting out a string of quiet curses as he did so. "Stupid, bloody bed!"

Harry used that excuse to open his own eyes. When Ron looked up from his bleeding toe and found Harry's eyes on his face, he let out a shriek of surprise, falling back against the bed. "Jesus, Harry!" he whispered. "Don't do that!"

Harry, so overjoyed at hearing Ron talk to him, suddenly forget everything that he'd wanted to say. However, Ron froze as soon as the words left his mouth, his eyes darkening. Angrily he began gathering up his clothes. Harry noticed that he looked about as tired as Harry felt.

Harry rose quickly. "Ron... how are you?" he tried.

Ron looked at him with bleary eyes before turning away in disgust.

"Okay. Guess that answers that then." Fixing on his glass, Harry ventured again. "So... I guess you heard about me and Hermione."

Ron kept picking up clothes methodically, most of which didn't even belong to him.

"I think that," Harry continued. "It might be a good idea if we discussed it, seeing as though you seem slightly upset..." Ron threw a pair of pants at him. The pants caught him squarely in the chest, but the blow didn't hurt all that much. "Or we could just ignore it, even..."

Ron's face turned red and he stalked out of the room, still wearing his pajamas and carrying a bundle of clothes. Harry followed him. "Ron, wait up! We were in the middle of a conversation..."

Ron kept going, refusing to turn around and look at him. Harry kept up with his fast stride, a foot or two behind him. When Ron reached the bathroom, he swung the door open, and slammed it right into Harry's face.

Harry rubbed pathetically at his nose. "Well, that went well..." he said, weakly.

Returning back to his dorm, he dressed, grabbed his homework and went to the Gryffindor common room to work on it. He had vague hopes that Ron would come down at some point and he'd have another chance to ambush him, but Ron locked himself in the bathroom and refused to emerge, despite Seamus' pleas with him an hour later.

Harry set about to do his work, setting aside his Care of Magical Creatures homework, hoping that Hagrid would let him weasel out of it. His History of Magic reading was almost as dull as Professor Binns himself, and it only succeeded in making him feel sleepier. He was halfway through his Charms homework before he realized that he didn't understand any of it, and that he may as well give it up before he fell asleep and never awoke. As the Gryffindor common room was beginning to buzz with early morning chatter, Harry set his stuff down and left for the Great Hall.

As he went, he heard Seamus cry out, "Ron, he's leaving. Will you please come out so I can go pee?"

Harry felt cold and hollow as he descended Hogwarts' long stairs to the Great Hall. He wasn't sure what he'd do if Ron refused to speak to him forever. He and Hermione were the only close friends he had, he needed Ron to get through everything that was going to come at him over the next few years.

In the loud din of the Great Hall, he scoped out Hermione, seated at the very end of the Gryffindor table, her nose in a book. He went to

join her, but didn't say anything as he sat down. She hadn't appeared to have finished her homework either, and Harry knew better than to disrupt her when she was feeling slightly panicky over something.

They ate in silence, Hermione's quill meeting parchment the only noise. Harry was all too aware of Ron entering the Great Hall with Seamus and Dean. Ron met his gaze, saw him sitting next to Hermione, and steered Seamus and Dean to the opposite side of the table, his mouth forming into a tight line.

Harry sighed, and laid his forehead against the table. He was exhausted, his best friend wasn't speaking to him, and he was about to fail all his classes for the day.

Hermione gathered up her stuff, stacking her books in a pile next to her on the bench. She turned to him, as if noticing him for the first time. "Harry!" she greeted cheerfully, leaning up to peck him on the cheek. "You look exhausted."

Harry glanced at her through heavy lids. She looked flushed and rejuvenated. "You, uh, don't."

"Slept great last night," she said.

"That's good," he said distractedly, sneaking a look at Ron. He was refusing to so much as look anywhere near their end of the table, seemingly entranced in his conversation with Seamus and Dean.

Hermione followed his gaze, and he felt her hand seek his under the table. She squeezed his hand tightly. "I guess it didn't go well, huh?"

"Well, I wouldn't really know," Harry said honestly. "He sort of pretended that I didn't exist."

Hermione looked worried. "Oh, dear."

Harry thought that the situation was a little more serious than an 'Oh, dear,' but the last thing he needed was another fight with Hermione. "I don't understand... I mean, it's not like we were plotting to kill him

or anything. Why won't he just let me talk to him? How can I make things better if he pretends I'm not there?"

Hermione sighed. "I'm not all that surprised, honestly. As you know, he's always sort of liked me, it just came out at times when he wasn't really expecting it."

Harry stared bleakly out the window, feeling like he must have been pretty oblivious if the whole world (Hermione included) appeared to know that Ron had some giant crush on her or something. Keeping his voice steady, Harry said, "And did you... you know... like him back?"

Hermione shrugged. "Maybe."

Harry tugged his hand out of her grasp. "Oh."

"Don't you dare!" she warned. "You asked, so don't get all uptight because you don't like the answer!"

Too tired to argue, Harry just nodded sleepily. "But you don't anymore, right?"

"Of course not," she replied crossly. "I like you or I wouldn't be here right now. But, Harry, this just goes to show that you would have been just as upset if things had gone the other way."

Harry, remembering how left out he'd felt the summer before with Hermione and Ron together at Grimmauld place and him stuck at the Dursley's, could suddenly sympathize a lot better with his friend. "But he'll get over it, right?" he asked uncertainly. "He's bound to be upset, at first. But he'll... he'll get over it..."

Harry found her hand under the table again, gripping it like it might give him the answers he was looking for. Hermione herself was a little less forthcoming, "I hope so."

Yawning sleepily, he rested his head on the palm of his hand, ready to close his eyes until classes started. He was rudely awakened by the arrival of the Morning Post, as a large document fell on his head

with a dull thunk! It was Hermione's Daily Prophet. Taking a large sip of Hermione's morning coffee in hopes that it would wake him up, Harry turned the paper over, only to spit the coffee out into the faces of some second-years sitting across from them.

Too distracted by the horror on the front page of the Daily Prophet Harry didn't even notice the looks the second-years shot him. He pointed at it, not able to come up with any sort of coherent phrase. "The Prophet... it's... it's... bloody crazy... private... Hermione... what the bloody hell! Can't be serious... this is a joke... a nightmare... why would..."

Hermione gave him a disgruntled look and snatched the paper out of his hands. Catching sight of the leading story, she paled and set it quickly down. There on the front page, clearly marked as the leading story read: The Boy Who Lived Finds Love at Hogwarts.

"No... no... no... no..." he repeated over and over again.

Shakily, Hermione picked the paper up and began to read:

Harry Potter, famous vanquisher of You-Know-Who and the young wizard who brought his return to light, has finally found himself a girlfriend at Hogwarts. Muggle born Hermione Granger, long time friend of Mr. Potter and top of her class at Hogwarts, is the lucky recipient. It has long been rumored that the two shared more than just friendship. She has been one of the few constants in an otherwise tumultuous life for Harry Potter.

Rebus Hagrid who had watched them grow closer over the years, was overjoyed to hear the news. "Bes' two wizards yer likely to meet," he said. "Always been there for each other, only a matter o' time, really." (Hermione smiled, "Aww, that's sweet.")

Dean Thomas, a sixth-year student who shares a dorm room with Mr. Potter, wasn't at all surprised by the news. "They always spent all their time together, anyway. Hermione's really smart, but I never bought the excuse that all those late nights were because Harry 'needed homework help' if you get what I mean."

"You did need help!" Hermione burst out, furiously. "I was helping you!"

"He's just joking, Hermione," Harry said, shooting Dean an angry look.

Others, though, are less sure. Jane Noxon, a third-year student in Hufflepuff expressed doubt over the validity of their relationship. "Well, Hermione's really ugly. And, besides the brains, she doesn't really have a whole lot going for her. See, we think that Hermione put a spell on him or something. Because clearly Harry, who could have his pick of girls, can do much better."

Hermione trailed off, shooting Harry a warning look as he stood up, looking furiously towards the Hufflepuff table. "I'll kill her," he said. "She's lying, she doesn't know what she's talking about, you are not ugly."

"I know!" Hermione said, tugging him down. "She's just jealous, that's all."

Harry sent the Hufflepuff table another suspicious look, but he sat. "Keep going," he muttered.

We at the Daily Prophet can certainly understand the reaction, Harry has grown into a rather handsome looking boy over the years and is a favourite in many households. Ms. Granger and Mr. Potter were not available to comment, but we wish them both happy times ahead.

Hermione snorted. "Bet they'd love it if you broke up with me after reading this interview."

Harry, angry with the Daily Prophet, furious with Jane Noxon of Hufflepuff, and somewhat sick by yet more attention hit the table angrily. "Well, they're certainly NOT going to be getting any kind of THAT satisfaction, after what they wrote about you. The nerve of these people... I could just... just..."

To Harry's surprise, Hermione's entire face lit up with a blinding smile. "Harry, do you know what you just said?"

Harry, thoroughly confused, just shook his head.

"Instead of terrifying you, the article did... the exact opposite, really."

Harry blinked, still unsure of what she was saying. Swallowing any retorts, Harry just nodded. "You're right."

She beamed happily at him. It made him feel slightly goofy, to have her look at him so happily. "Let's go," she said, still cheerful. "You can curse Jane Noxon later, I want to see Hagrid before class starts."

Harry followed her gladly out of the Great Hall. By that time, everyone had read the cover of the newspaper, and he and Hermione were attracting looks from faculty and students alike. The exception being Ron, who managed to look everywhere but at him.

Once outside, Harry let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Hermione?"

"Mmm?"

"Why doesn't it bother you? What people are saying? It bothers me and I'm not the one on the receiving end."

Hermione just shrugged. "I was sort of expecting it, I guess. Remember those rumors that horrible Skeeter woman spread back in our forth-year?" Harry nodded. "Well, I still sometimes get angry letters from people. You're famous Harry, and I know that you don't particularly like it, but you are. People are naturally going to look at me with suspicion, especially if I don't fit the image of the girl you should be dating."

Harry stopped her. "And what image is that?"

"Oh, you know, tall, pretty, brave, great Quidditch player, certainly not Muggle born, and probably not head of her class, either."

Harry went completely still. "Are you getting jealous of Cho again?"

Hermione shot him a look. "No, but I'm beginning to suspect that you want me to be jealous of Cho."

Harry, who'd sort of been hoping that very thing, started walking quickly towards Hagrid's hut again. "But people aren't taking the time to try and get to know you, they're just... glancing at you... they don't know you the way I do."

"Which is why," Hermione said, jogging to catch up to him. "You're the one going out with me."

Harry frowned. "That was just confusing."

"Besides," Hermione continued, ignoring him. "You're the one people never get to know. You're the Boy Who Lived, not a 16 year-old boy in love for the first time..." (Harry coughed loudly and Hermione sent him a disgruntled look) "...and you're certainly not just an ordinary young, wizard, trying to figure out what you want to do with your life along with everyone else. I can't even imagine what that must be like to live with."

Harry stopped outside Hagrid's hut, and sought out her hand. "Thanks," he said quietly.

"For what?"

"For being the only one who understands that."

She smiled at him. "There's a lot about you I understand."

Harry smiled. "I know."

"Boy, yeh two're certainly sappy!" said a booming voice from behind them. They spun quickly around. Hagrid was clutching a big axe and grinning broadly. Fang was lying wearily next to him. "Been wonderin' when yeh'd come to tell me the happy news. I on'y found out when the Daily Prophet came 'round sniffin' out gossip."

Hermione flushed, "Well, it's sort of a new thing. We were sort of..."

"Trying to figure things out for ourselves first," Harry continued. "It wasn't like this was planned a long time ago or anything."

"I wouldn't be too sure o' that, Harry. Always knew yeh two would end up together."

"Really?" Harry said, interested. "You didn't think she'd end up with Ron?"

Hermione shot him a warning look, but Harry watched Hagrid eagerly for an answer. He finally shrugged. "Always been somepin' about the way the two of yeh trusted each other." Hagrid's eyes lit up and he added with amusement, "An understanding, if yer will."

"Oh, shut up," Harry said, but without any force behind his words.

"Well, come in! Come in!" Opening the door to his hut, Hagrid shoed them in, depositing his axe on the floor. Hermione shot it a disgruntled glance as she gingerly stepped over it. Hagrid offered them some treacle fudge and Harry, seeing the hopeful look on his face, took it despite his better judgement.

Hermione stayed behind him, eyeing the fudge suspiciously. "No thank you, Hagrid," she said faintly. "Already eaten."

Hagrid looked at Harry expectantly, and Harry, closing his eyes, and bit of a tiny piece, chewing forcefully. Suddenly unable to move his jaw, Harry just said, "Mmmm..."

It seemed to satisfy Hagrid, who started the kettle for tea. Seeing his back turned, Harry dropped the remnants of the fudge into a nearby flower pot. Hermione rubbed his back soothingly. "You okay?"

"Mmm... hmmm..." Harry managed to get out.

"So!" Hagrid cried cheerfully, as the pot began to boil. "How's Ron takin' the news?"

Harry began choking, which was very hard considering his jaws were glued together.

"Not so well," Hermione explained. "Harry's tried to talk to him, but he doesn't seem all that... eager to listen to him."

Harry nodded profusely, suddenly fearing Ron's reaction to the article in the Daily Prophet. "Don't surprise me much," Hagrid said. "Always did have bit of crush on you, Hermione."

Harry slumped slightly. He finally managed to unglue his mouth enough to say. "Do you think he'll ever talk to me again?"

Hagrid regarded him sympathetically. "I 'spect he'll be able to get over it. Given enough time."

Harry nodded glumly, wishing that enough time was right away. Hearing voices outside the hut, Hagrid peered out the window. "Out with yeh. Time to start class." Picking up his axe, Hagrid flung it over his shoulder and exited the hut.

Hermione and Harry followed him, though at a much more subdued pace. "I wonder what he needs the axe for." Hermione said quietly.

Harry didn't answer, watching with horror as Malfoy, gripping an issue of the day's Daily Prophet, was gleefully reading its excerpts to an equally gleeful crowd. Upon seeing Harry and Hermione, he smirked. "Well, if it isn't the couple of the moment. Seen your coming out announcement." Feigning a look of worry, he added, "Of course, not all of it is good." He clucked his tongue. "Been making any love potions lately, Granger? 'Cause according to this source, you're too ugly to have landed precious Potter." Malfoy's audience roared with laughter.

Harry had his wand out before he even realized it. "You'll pay for that, Malfoy..."

"Harry don't!"

Hermione's warning didn't matter. Harry watched, stupefied, as Ron elbowed his way through the crowd, cracked Malfoy hard in the nose, and then towered over him, rubbing at his knuckles. Harry slowly

lowered his wand as Malfoy fell to the ground, whimpering and clutching at his wounded face.

Hermione gripped onto Harry's arm fearfully. "Ron...?" she whispered.

Ron stood over Malfoy, his face the same colour as his flaming-red hair. "You EVER talk about her like that again and I'll... I'll...!" Apparently not quite sure what he'd do, Ron trailed off and continued to glare down at him.

Hermione and Harry exchanged a look. Hagrid came over to see what all the fuss was about, his eyes moving from Harry and Hermione, to Ron, and to Malfoy lying flat on his back. Moving people out of the way by the reach of his long arms, Hagrid reached Malfoy, grabbed him by the scruff of the shirt and hauled him to his feet. Wiping the dust off his clothes, Hagrid frowned. "Fell o'er did ya, Malfoy?"

Malfoy, looking a little dazed, sought out Ron with his gaze. "What? No... that's not what happened... I think..."

Harry clamped a hand over his mouth to keep himself from laughing at Malfoy's befuddled expression. Harry caught Ron's eye, and the two shared a grin before Ron froze and looked away.

"Well, then, if yer'll quite done falling o'er, I'd like to get started...."

Harry looked around for Ron, spotting him in next to Seamus and Dean. He refused to meet Harry's gaze, and, despite the punch he'd laid on Malfoy, still seemed quite content to go on pretending that he didn't exist.

"That was something..." Hermione whispered. "Maybe he's beginning to come around."

"Yeah," Harry said dully, sure that Hermione was going into Wishful Thinking Mode.

"Oh, look!" she cried. "Hagrid's using the axe."

Sure enough, Hagrid began striking the ground... in what looked like random motions. The axe was leaving behind long, knife like slits. Hermione gasped aloud when, after a few hits, something small and blue popped out of the ground before disappearing again. Hagrid, appearing not to have noticed, continued hitting the ground in long, sweeping, random motions. His work was rewarded by a small, green ball that shot up in the air, twirled around and then disappeared. Another ball, this time red, shot up in the air, turned blue and disappeared once again. Soon the air was filled with flying balls, changing colours, lofting up in the air and then disappearing.

"They're called Yarmuchs!" Hagrid said proudly, watching them fly into the air and disappear back into their slit shaped holes. "Interesting little buggers, very rare. Lucky to have found some this time o' year. Trick with Yarmuchs is to give them a place to come out of... and a place to go back into."

Hermione's eyes widened in interest. "Why are they so many colours?"

Hagrid beamed at her. "I was hopin' someone would ask! They change you see, dependin' on their mood and the moods of those aroun' 'em. For homework..." the class, including Harry, let out a groan. Hermione leaned forward in interest. "I want you to figure out what each colour stands for."

30 minutes later, Harry walked back up to the castle, feeling even more tired. Hermione jogged a few paces ahead of him, going on about the Yarmuchs and how she thought Hagrid was improving as a teacher. "It's like he's finally figured it out, you know?" she said, for about the 50th time. "Just needed a little confidence, I always thought. Hagrid's great with creatures, he just got kind of nervous in front of us..."

Harry yawned, tuning her out. He noticed Ron up ahead of them. He was alone, staring intently at the ground and walking lethargically. He thought about trying to talk to him again, but couldn't quite summon up the right amount of energy.

"...As for what the colours represent, it's exciting, isn't it? Wouldn't it be wonderful to understand what a person was feeling based solely on what colour they were turning? Make life a bit easier. For example, it would be nice to know whether or not you're being listened to when you're talking, just by looking at someone's colour."

Harry blinked at her sleepily. "Sorry. I'm sort of... tired."

She examined his face in worry. "I can see that. Is there something bothering you?"

Harry shrugged. "You mean besides the fact that Ron and I aren't talking?"

"Are you sleeping at all?"

Harry jerked a shoulder. "Sort of. I've been... dreaming a lot."

Hermione nodded in understanding and chewed her lip thoughtfully. "There's this... potion I know how to make. It helps keep out unwanted dreams."

Harry felt his stomach turn over. "Is it like Occlumency?" Though he now had Dumbledore giving him Occlumency lessons, rather than Snape, Harry found he still didn't like them very much. Dumbledore insisted that they were crucial to stopping his so-called "tie" to Voldemort, but Harry was nearly certain that nothing would ever

severe the pain he felt in his scar when Voldemort was feeling a particularly strong emotion.

"Certainly not," Hermione replied with a frown. "It just helps a person leave their worries behind. After what happened last year... I was having trouble sleeping and..."

Harry felt his throat constrict. "Oh."

Hermione watched him carefully. "Harry, you weren't the only one that cared about him. I would have done anything..."

"I know," he interrupted sharply. "You nearly did have to give everything."

Hermione touched his arm lightly. "It wasn't just... it wasn't just Sirius, either. I was worried about you. I was worried about what V-Voldemort would do to you." She shook her head and took a deep breath. "I'm sleeping better, now. I just wanted you to know, that... I know something that might help."

Harry felt a lump gathering in his throat. Grabbing her hand, he forced her to keep moving so that she wouldn't see the tears that had gathered in his eyes. "I'm fine," he said forcefully.

She squeezed his hand. "You don't always have to be. Not around me, at least."

Harry, feeling slightly panicky, just nodded, hoping that she would be quiet because he wasn't sure how long he could keep his tears at bay. Reaching the History of Magic classroom, he slid into a seat, pulled out his notes, and busily began scribbling his name and date on each piece of parchment.

Hermione sat down next to him. She shot him a worried look, but refrained from saying anything. Harry was glad, he wasn't quite sure how long his exhausted, over-frayed nerves would hold up.

When Professor Binns started his lecture, Harry tried to listen about the First Goblin Movement. He propped his head up on his hand,

staring straight at the ghost professor. Professor Binns had a deep, melodic voice that rarely changed its volume or expression. Harry closed his eyes, still listening. The classroom faded, until all he could hear was Professor Binns' voice.

He was sitting with Hermione in the Gryffindor common room. They were curled up by the fire, Hermione nestled in his arms. She would turn around to look at him happily every so often and tell him that it was okay, he could tell her anything. He would assure her he was fine and they would share a long, lingering kiss.

Only, he wasn't lying with Hermione anymore. He was watching the two of them from just outside the room. Hermione was still smiling happily, but he was frowning, looking unsettled.

He was running down a long corridor, at the end of it he could see where he was cuddled up with Hermione. When he reached the entrance, he found that she wasn't curled up with him, after all.

She was in Ron's arms, shooting Ron happy looks, assuring Ron that he would be okay. Stomach clenching painfully, Harry walked toward them in trepidation. He no longer had anyone. His parents were gone. Sirius was gone. And his two best friends were about to tell him they no longer needed him. He would have to face Voldemort on his own. They turned to look at him, sharing matching, happy looks.

Hermione opened her mouth. "Harry! Harry come on!"

He tried to ask her where he was supposed to be going and why she was with Ron when she was supposed to be with him. No sound came out, but her expression became more harried and urgent.

"Harry! Wake up! Class is over! Harry..." he felt someone shake him painfully and something sharp jabbed him in his ribs.

With a start, he opened his eyes. Hermione peered at him uncertainly. Harry felt all the colour drain from his face... this was it, then... she would tell him she no longer needed him... that she had Ron... and...

"Harry, what's wrong? You're awfully pale. Maybe you're getting sick after all..."

Seeing the worry on her face pulled him back to reality. It was a dream. Just a dream. It was all a dream. "Hermione," he said desperately, still feeling the horror of the dream clinging to him. "Are we still, you know, together?"

She frowned. "Yes... are you sure you're alright?"

Harry stood up suddenly, sending his chair skidding backwards. "It was just a nightmare. I thought you'd left me behind, but you haven't, not really..." Harry tried to sort out his thoughts. "Ron. I understand now, what he must be feeling. I need to find him."

Waving absentmindedly at Professor Binns as he fled the classroom, Harry took the hallway at a run. He could hear the patter of Hermione's feet behind him. "Harry... what's going on... what do you understand..."

"Nothing. Everything..." he yelled over his shoulder. "I just... I have to find Ron."

He sped up and knew that Hermione was having trouble keeping up with him. He didn't care. He raced along the hall, turned the corner. He kept going, knowing that Ron couldn't have gone far. He put on another burst of speed, Hermione's ragged breathing disappearing. Rounding another corner, he saw a flash of red-hair at the very end.

"RON!" he bellowed, running as hard as his legs would possibly carry him. At the end of the hall, he caught up with him. Panting, Harry leaned back against the wall, horrified to see that Ron still seemed content on ignoring him. He pushed himself away from the wall, flinging himself at Ron. Grabbing his friend's robes, he found himself eye to eye with him.

"Ron... we have..." Harry panted, still gripping his robes. "To... to... talk. Sorry... very... sorry..."

Ron regarded him icily. "Get off."

"NO!" Harry shouted. "I need to TALK to you! I understand what you're feeling and it's NOT true! We're not abandoning you..."

Ron shoved him. "Harry, I don't want to talk about this!"

Harry let go of his robes, but stood his ground. "I don't CARE! You can't just ignore it and pretend it's not happening! I'm sorry we didn't tell you right away, okay? But we can't do anything about that now! I didn't MEAN to let everything come out in one stupid note!"

"SHUT UP!" Ron hollered. "You don't understand."

Harry clenched his fists. "Don't understand, WHAT? All I'm trying to do is make things RIGHT and you're acting as though I plotted to KILL you!"

"YOU CAN'T MAKE THINGS RIGHT!!!" Ron yelled ferociously. "THERE IS NOTHING THAT WILL MAKE THINGS BETTER!"

Harry flinched. "I don't accept that," he said calmly. "Ron, our friendship..."

"Doesn't mean ANYTHING to you, Harry!" he bellowed angrily. "If it had meant ANYTHING, then you would have told me BEFORE you and Hermione got together." He paused, taking in a sharp breath. He continued in a calmer tone. "If I had thought, for one second that Hermione and I might... well, I would have told you beforehand. Because I wouldn't have wanted to do anything that would ruin our friendship."

Harry's legs felt weak. "That's not fair," he whispered.

Ron tried to brush past him, but Harry stood in his way. "Get out of my way."

"No." Harry's whole body was shaking. "You have NO right to pass judgement. You don't know how you would've acted had it been the other way around."

Ron narrowed his eyes. "Get out of my way."

"NO! YOU NEED TO GIVE ME A CHANCE TO EXPLAIN!"

"THERE IS NOTHING TO EXPLAIN! NOW GET OUT OF MY WAY!"

"NO!!!"

Ron took out his wand. Harry, startled by the sight of it, took a step backward, before brandishing his own wand. They glared at each other, their eyes meeting.

Ron raised his wand. "I said, 'Get out of my way.' I won't to ask again."

Harry raised his in defiance. "And I said I wanted a chance to explain."

Harry saw Hermione running towards them out of the corner of his eye. He stood his stance resolutely. Ron opened his mouth and Harry yelled, "Stupi—" at the same time that Ron shouted, "EXPELLIARMUS!"

Ron's curse hit Harry full blast and he flew backwards down the hall, his head cracking against the floor. His wand flew out of his hand and he could vaguely hear Hermione shrieking.

Ron stood over him, looking completely bewildered. Harry realized, with some pain, that despite all his Defense Against the Dark Arts qualifications, he'd just lost a dual. Miserably. Rubbing his forehead, he struggled to sit up, only to fall backwards again when Hermione threw herself in his arms.

"What are you DOING?" she sobbed out, clinging to him. "You and Ron having a dual? Are you completely stupid? You could be hurt! OR DEAD!"

"I hardly think that..." Harry tried to protest, but Hermione shot him such a dangerous look that he shut his mouth.

Ron fetched his wand, and held it out to him with trepidation. Harry took it, noticing that Ron's hands were shaking. "Harry... I don't really know what came over me..."

Harry was about to say that he understood and was about to do the very same thing to Ron, anyway, when any kind of commiseration died in his throat.

"The very SAME question that I would like an answer to."

Ron's body went ridged and Harry paled, turning slowly around. There was Professor McGonagall, glaring at the both of them and wearing a very disapproving expression.

"Never," she said, in a clipped tone. "Have I seen such a display between members of the same house. I am disgusted by what I have just witnessed, especially by the two of you, whom I have come to expect better from. If you are capable of walking, Mr. Potter, I want both of you in my office. Now. I will be contacting the Headmaster."

Hermione helped Harry up. He looked at Professor McGonagall's retreating back in panic. "Well, I think that you deserve it," Hermione snapped. "After what you two just did! I'm surprised that she's not expelling you this very moment!" She let him go and Harry was very afraid he was going to go crashing to the floor again. Hermione squeaked, seeing him waver on his feet, and grabbed his arm to keep him from falling.

Ron took his other arm. "It's okay, Hermione. I've got him."

Hermione looked uncertain, but let go of Harry. Much to Harry's chagrin, he had to allow Ron to carry him along. Ron, for his part, seemed to be in a much better mood.

Harry realized that was just fine with him. A few minutes of pain seemed like hardly a large price to pay if it meant Ron would talk to him again. Grunting, they made their way down the hall.

"Think she's going to expel us?" Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. "Doubt it," he wheezed. "I don't think she'd go to this much trouble if she was merely going to throw us out. Besides, we've done worse."

Ron nodded. "That's true." Ron paused and thought something over. "I'm sorry about losing my temper and cursing you like that."

Harry thought he sounded decidedly unsorry, but didn't point that out. "Nahh... it's nothing. I'm fine."

Ron snorted, but continued to help him along. Upon reaching McGonagall's office, Ron went still, looking terrified. As Ron helped him into a chair, Harry found that the prospect of being on speaking terms with Ron was far more important than any impending punishment.

Professor McGonagall stood behind her desk, her arms folded across her chest. Her lips were pressed into a tight line. And she looked, Harry decided, very, very furious.

McGonagall gave Harry such a piercing gaze that he shifted uncomfortably. "Potter, are you quite alright, or would you like to be brought down to the infirmary?"

Harry was impressed that such a gentle-sounding question could come out sounding so accusatory. "I'm fine, really."

Ron snorted again. "He's not, I got him really good."

"You did not!"

Professor McGonagall rubbed wearily at her temples. "Boys!" she cried sharply. "That will be quite enough."

Ron gulped, sharing a look of horror with Harry. Harry resisted the urge to grin.

"What the two of you displayed tonight... it's an embarrassment. To me. To this school. To Gryffindor. To yourselves. You did not just put yourselves in danger, but you put others at risk, too. You had no idea

who could have come around that corner while you were throwing curses at each other." She peered at them stonily and Harry could feel the hair on the back of his neck rising. "You should be ashamed. I don't remember ever being so furious, and I have seen many things in my time here at Hogwarts--"

"What about the time that we arrived here in a Muggle, flying car?" Ron interrupted. Professor McGonagall stared at Ron until he shifted uncomfortably. "Well, you know, you said you couldn't remember ever having been so furious before, but you were pretty furious then... and I'm just trying to get a little perspective," he finished hastily.

Harry grinned happily at the memory. "The look on George and Fred's faces..."

Ron caught his eye and laughed. "Oh, yeah, they still bring it up in jealousy every once and a while and...."

"SILENCE!" McGonagall shouted, rubbing at her temples again.

Harry, shocked by her outburst, shut his mouth. Ron looked at him and rolled his eyes, clearing wondering what her problem was. Harry had to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

The exchange was not lost, however, on McGonagall. "Was this a joke? Because, frankly, Potter and Weasley, I'm less than impressed if it was."

Ron shook his head. "Oh no, I was really angry."

Harry nodded. "Me, too."

She stared at them in incomprehension. "You have five minutes to come up with an explanation that I find acceptable, or else I'm going to have to ask you both to pack up your bags."

The seriousness of the situation finally sunk in, and Harry began to think that maybe it wasn't so funny, after all. "Please, Professor," he said, slightly panicky now. "It's kind of a private matter."

She just stared at him balefully. "Well, then," she said in a clipped tone. "Next time you are dealing with a private matter, I suggest you don't get caught. You have four minutes."

Ron swallowed and stared down at his hands. "This isn't Harry's fault."

"To hell it isn't!" Harry burst in, angrily. "Professor, I lied to Ron about what was going with Hermione. I was going to tell him, but Professor Snape got there first and he was really angry and wouldn't talk to me so I confronted him and..."

"And I wouldn't talk to him," Ron continued. "Because he'd lied to me and, well, it was my two best friends ..."

"But we weren't really abandoning him, you see!" Harry added. "He only thought we were. So I had to make him listen..."

"And, of course, I didn't want to listen ..."

"And one thing led to another and our wands were out and we were really, really angry..."

"And that's when I beat Harry!"

Harry winced. "You didn't, really," he protested weakly. "I wanted to let you win...."

Ron's face hardened. "Of course not!" he muttered. "You always have to be perfect, don't you, Harry? I can't win anything! You have the girl, you have the fame, you have the article in the Daily Prophet..."

McGonagall watched their entire spiel without moving a muscle. "SILENCE!" she yelled again.

Harry swallowed any retort he was about to make, mentally noting that maybe he and Ron weren't on as equal footing as he had been beginning to think.

There was a serene knock and Professor Dumbledore opened the door slightly, peering around the corner. Upon seeing Ron and Harry he smiled warmly. "Ahh," he said. "Just wanted to make sure I'm in the correct spot." He entered the office, shutting the door behind him. "Now, Minerva, what seems to be the problem?"

Still furious, McGonagall pointed her wand at the two of them with a shaky hand. "Headmaster, Potter and Weasley thought it would be amusing to practice dueling in Hogwarts' corridors."

"I see," Dumbledore replied, his eyes twinkling slightly. "And who won the duel?"

Harry and Ron looked at each other in confusion. Finally, Ron held up his hand. "I did, Sir."

Dumbledore nodded. "Hmmm. Interesting, very interesting. Was anyone injured?"

"Harry's still a little woozy, but I think he'll be okay," Ron answered, slight pride leaking into his voice.

Harry kept his mouth shut, not really wanting to get into another argument in front of Dumbledore.

Dumbledore nodded again. "Yes. Well, then, Harry you're free to go. I'd like a short word with Ronald." His wrinkled eyes twinkled again. "That is, if you're able to walk."

Harry stood shakily and tried to push away his dizziness. "Sir, this isn't Ron's fault. I provoked him. We deserve equal blame."

"HEY!" Ron cried. "I don't need you sticking up for me!"

Harry ignored him, watching Dumbledore. "It was mostly my fault, actually," he said, quieter. "I sort of messed things up."

"Don't listen to him, Sir!" Ron said, his face flushed. "I was the one who attacked him, remember?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Quite right, quite right. You both acted rashly and dangerously." He looked at Professor McGonagall. "What do you think, Minerva? 50 points from Gryffindor and a week's worth of detention each?"

Professor McGonagall looked a little bewildered. "Yes, I suppose that would do..."

Dumbledore gestured towards the door. "Then you are free to leave, Harry."

Harry, very confused, walked towards the door, surprised when an invisible force gently pushed him all the way out and shut it in his face. He stared at it for a moment, wondering what Dumbledore wanted to talk to Ron about before turning to go to the Gryffindor common room.

"Sit down, Ronald, sit down." Dumbledore said mildly, gently steering him into the seat that Harry had just vacated.

Ron sat, looking unsure. "Professor," he said slowly. "Are you going to be telling me about how I shouldn't be mad at Harry? Because I don't think that will do much to change my mind."

Dumbledore glanced at McGonagall and gestured towards her desk. "Do you mind?"

McGonagall, sounding as confused as Ron felt, said. "Of course not."

Dumbledore hopped nimbly up on her desk, sitting so that he could stare down at Ron. Ron found himself shrinking slightly under Dumbledore's penetrating gaze. "Actually," the Headmaster said calmly. "I realize that this must be a very trying time for you. It must be difficult, constantly feeling as if you're living in Harry's shadow. I can't imagine what it must be like, seeing him "win" the girl, as well."

"I don't live in Harry's shadow!" Ron burst out angrily.

"Of course not," Dumbledore said serenely. "However, I'm sure that it must feel that way."

Ron shifted uncomfortably under Dumbledore's shrewd gaze. "Harry lied to me, Professor. They both did. He had plenty of opportunity to tell me... and he didn't." Ron swallowed hard. "I would've. If it had been me—I would've."

Dumbledore sighed. "Very true. However, I myself have always found 'would have' to be somewhat of an... impossibility. One can never know how they would act until they are thrown into a situation."

"He lied," Ron said bitterly. "Nothing else matters."

Dumbledore searched through the pockets of his robes, apparently looking for something important. Ron stared at him, wondering if he'd heard anything he'd just said. "Aha!" Dumbledore said triumphantly, pulling out a stick of gum. He held it out for Ron. "It's mint... quite good..."

Ron continued to stare at him. "Erm... I'm good, thanks."

"Minerva?"

Professor McGonagall just stared at Dumbledore pointedly.

"Very well," Dumbledore said. "More for me then." Dumbledore unwrapped the stick of gum and began chewing it rather loudly. "Love makes you do the whacky."

Ron frowned, still staring at him in mild confusion. "Sir... I don't understand..."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "You will, Ronald. You will."

Ron just stared at him, thinking about how Dumbledore was less than helpful. "Sir, are you saying that Harry loves... I mean to say that Harry might love..."

"Certainly not," Dumbledore broke in. "Good heavens, that's quite a large jump to make."

"But... but you just said that..."

"Love makes you do the whacky?"

"Yes!"

Dumbledore took a loud smack of his gum and peered at Ron with a wise expression. "More general, Ronald. I do not believe that you live in Harry's shadow. I believe that Harry lives in yours."

"Neither of us lives in any shadow!" Ron cried.

"Harry lives in a life that has long been absent of love," Dumbledore said. "You have not. And though he feels loved and accepted by your family, he is not and cannot ever be one of you."

Ron blinked, trying to process his words. "Wait," he said slowly. "You're saying that Harry's jealous of me? But... but that's impossible... he has..."

"Everything?" Dumbledore finished, somewhat sadly. "You'll often find that everything is a definition one makes up on their own, used to describe what they think they desire, when nothing can truly give them everything." Dumbledore put a hand on Ron's shoulder. "There is no one that can truly understand what it must be like to be Harry. You are one of the two most important people in his life and he desperately needs you. Bear that in mind."

Dumbledore stood up and led Ron to the door. Ron paused and looked at him. "But, Professor... that doesn't make sense... what does this have to do with Harry and Hermione?"

Dumbledore chuckled and looked appraisingly at the ceiling. He thought for a moment. "No... it's not mint after all... it's cinnamon."

Ron was desperately trying to process that information when he realized that Dumbledore was talking about his gum. Feeling stupid, he didn't realize it when Dumbledore pushed him out of McGonagall's office and closed the door.

He stared blankly at the door for a moment before shaking his head.
"What the bloody hell was that?"

Harry could not find Hermione anywhere. He'd checked the library (twice), the Great Hall, the Gryffindor common room, and he'd even made Ginny check the girls' bathroom for him. After re-checking the library for a third time, he made his way to the common room, sat down by the fire, and stared morosely into it, waiting for Ron and feeling hopelessly alone.

He didn't need to wait long. Ron entered the common room, a bewildered look on his face. Upon seeing Harry, he made his way hesitantly over to him, standing awkwardly and watching the flames with a suspicious frown.

Harry looked at him. "What... what was that about?"

"Nothing," Ron answered quickly.

"Ron..." Harry stared down at his hands, pondering how best to tackle the question burning in his throat. "Are you still very... angry with me?"

Ron shrugged. "Not as much as I was."

"Oh."

"Harry..." Ron began slowly. "Are you... jealous of me?"

Harry looked startled. "What d'you mean?"

Ron shook his head. "Just something Dumbledore said. He reckons that you're envious of what I have."

Harry thought about it, wondering if this was supposed to be a trick question. "I'm not jealous of you," he finally said, slowly. "Sometimes I wish I had a family, a mum and dad, definitely a life out of the public eye, but that's not really the same thing. Why?"

"No, it's nothing." Ron answered quickly. "I'm just trying to figure things out."

"How's that going?" Harry asked.

He shrugged again. "I dunno."

Harry pressed on. "Ron, I want you to know, that we're not abandoning you. Nothing's changed the way we feel about you. You're our best friend and...."

"I know." Ron interrupted. "But... I don't really know if I want to be friends for a while. It's painful to see you and Hermione together."

Harry prodded the fire with his shoe, feeling a lump gather in his throat. "Do you want my Firebolt?" he asked, in a small voice.

Ron looked up, startled. "What?"

"My Firebolt? Do you want it? I'll give it to you if you want. I'll... I'll break up with Hermione. I'll do anything, Ron." Harry pleaded desperately. "Your friendship is way more important, okay? I'll give up whatever I have to..."

Ron shook his head. "It doesn't work that way."

"What do you mean?" Harry said. "C'mon... we can work things out..."

"We can't, Harry." Ron said with finality. "At least, not now. Just give me some time, okay?"

Harry nodded miserably.

"Look...I don't want you to break up with Hermione. I don't think it would help things, really. Plus, she'd probably cry and..." Ron trailed off, looking miserable.

Harry smiled slightly, his stomach tightening into a knot. "Thank you."

"But I don't think I want to be best friends right now, either. It doesn't mean I don't support you... or that I won't always be here for you. I just need..."

"Time?" Harry finished, in a hollow voice.

Ron nodded. "Yeah." He suddenly grinned cheekily. "And a nice, new Firebolt."

Harry chuckled, despite the fact that he felt like throwing up. "Sorry, you already turned it down. Not refunds."

"Oh. Damn."

Harry bit his lip. "Ron? Do you... you know... like Hermione?"

Ron flushed a deep, crimson red. "Of course not. Have you met her? Girl's mental."

"How long?"

"About two years, actually."

Harry felt the knot in his stomach tighten. "I'm sorry. I never knew." Then, slightly more betrayed, he added, "You never told me."

Ron shrugged. "Figured that you always sort of liked her, too." He swallowed, "Besides, I was worried that if I said it aloud, it would come true. I didn't really want to like her, you know? She's the most annoying, obnoxious, prissy, pompous girl in our year."

"Yeah," said Harry with a fond smile.

"And..." Ron added, looking hesitant. "I always thought that she'd chose you in the end. You've always understood her better, you're always doing that thing where you communicate just by looking at her, and you've always managed to keep your mouth shut at the rights times." Ron looked heartsick, "All I managed to do was fight with her a lot."

"She liked you, too. I don't even know," Harry looked at his hands. "I don't even know... how she ended up with me, really."

Ron shrugged morosely. "Beats me." Then, in a slightly more cajoling tone, added, "Because she's mental."

Harry laughed. "Yeah."

They shared a smile and Harry, in that moment, had the feeling that things would really end up okay in the end. The moment was broken, however, when the door to the common room slammed and Neville rushed in pale and sweating. When he saw the two of them, his eyes lit up slightly and he ran over to them, clutching his wand so tightly his hand was turning white.

"Neville... is everything alright...?" Ron asked, uncertain.

Harry stared at him, a cold fear working its way into the pit of his stomach. His voice was shaking when he asked, "What happened?"

Neville's eyes filled with tears. "It's Hermione..." he gasped out. "She's in the hospital wing."

Harry felt his stomach bottom out. His mouth painful dry he asked, "She's okay, though, right? I mean, she just scraped her knee or something, fell down the stairs, had a spell backfire... RIGHT?"

Neville shook his head, clearly terrified. "She was attacked..."

Whatever else Neville was going to say, Harry didn't know, because he took off running. He only knew that he had to get to the infirmary. He wasn't the least bit surprised to find that was Ron next to him, his face pale and his breathing shallow. Together they burst out of the common room, took the stairs two at a time, ran along Hogwarts' long hallways, through the Great Hall, down another flight of stairs, before rushing to the infirmary and bursting through the doors... and running smack into Professor McGonagall and Dumbledore.

Harry looked up at them, breathing hard, a stitch growing in his side, and a fear like he'd never really felt before tearing at his stomach. "Where is SHE?" he yelled. "What happened? Is she okay? WHO DID THIS???"

Ron nodded profusely beside him, apparently too winded to talk.

Professor McGonagall looked uncertain. "She's... well... we don't really know." At the look on Harry's face, she turned to Dumbledore. "Albus, perhaps you could..."

Dumbledore, looking grave, put a hand on Harry's shoulder and steered him through the hospital wing and into a smaller room. Harry let out a gasp. Hermione was lying on a single bed, her face pale and contorted in pain. She was unconscious and didn't make any movement as Harry approached the bed, shaking.

Behind him, he heard Ron breathing heavily. "Who did this to her...?"

Harry couldn't speak. He fell to his knees beside her bed and grasped her hand. "Hermione..." he croaked. "It's me. Wake up... please... wake up... it'll be okay. Just... wake up."

"She doesn't appear to be responding to anything," Dumbledore said quietly. Harry jumped, having completely forgotten that he was still in the room. "Madame Pomfrey decided to put her here to keep her safe. This room is enchanted to keep out all those that wish to harm her."

Harry stood up shakily, blinking back tears. He looked at Dumbledore, meeting his eyes. "What happened?" he asked again, his voice low and dangerously close to breaking.

"About a half hour ago, Hermione was attacked while she had her back turned," Dumbledore answered quietly. "We are not sure of the nature of the curse her attacker used, but I assure you that Madam Pomfrey will work around the clock until Hermione is cured."

"But... but..." Ron protested, sounding confused. "Who would want to attack Hermione? 'Sides Malfoy, that is. And even Malfoy would have the decency to look her in the eye when he did."

Harry looked at Hermione's still form, feeling sick. "Ron, they attacked her because of me."

Ron shook his head. "Harry, that's ridiculous. You were with me when she was attacked, you couldn't have been the..."

"They attacked her," he repeated, slowly. "Because she's going out with me. Because rumors are going around that she... she put a spell on me." Harry heard his voice cracking and couldn't even summon up the will to care. "This is all my fault."

"No, Harry, it is not your fault," Dumbledore interjected. "This is the fault of Hermione's attacker, and theirs alone. This could not have been foreseen, could not have been prevented." Dumbledore's voice hardened, "And will be dealt with."

Harry glanced up quickly. "You know who it is."

Dumbledore held his gaze. "Yes. And that person, I assure you, will be punished."

"That person should be HANGED!" Ron burst in, shaking. "There is no excuse for attacking a wizard behind their back... NO EXCUSE!"

Dumbledore kept his eyes on Harry's face. "This person does not deserve your hate, Harry, but your pity. Clearly a person who is willing to commit such an act is very unhappy."

"I don't care!" Harry yelled. "If they had a problem, they should have come after me! HERMIONE DOESN'T DESERVE TO BE PUNISHED BECAUSE I'M FAMOUS! WHO DID THIS TO HER???"

Dumbledore didn't so much as flinch. "I will not tell you, Harry, not matter how much you rage at me. However, if it makes you feel less useless, carry on."

Harry was so angry that his fists were clenched by his sides. He grabbed his wand and pointed it threateningly at Dumbledore. "WHO DID THIS???"

Ron backed up a step. "Harry," he said, weakly. "Maybe Dumbledore's right."

Dumbledore continued to watch Harry impassively. "Put your wand away."

"TELL ME WHO ATTACKED HER!"

Dumbledore's eyes darkened and he flicked his wand, calmly murmuring, "Expelliarmus."

For the second time that night, Harry felt himself powerfully thrown backwards. This time, instead of landing painfully on the floor, he landed on a heap of cushions. He struggled up immediately, looking around for his wand, only to see it in Dumbledore's hand.

"Give that back!" he raged.

Dumbledore looked sad. "I'm afraid I can't, Harry."

Harry felt something wet slide down his face. "Give it back!" he demanded again, in a broken voice. "I CAN'T LOSE HER, TOO!"

Dumbledore pocketed Harry's wand and crouched in front of him, his eyes looking old and sad. "And you won't." He put a protective arm on his shoulder. "But I need you to stay with her. I need you to try and reach her. Is that understood?"

Harry realized that he was crying. Wiping his tears away, he shook his head. "She doesn't deserve it... doesn't deserve it..." he whispered. Eyes fierce, he looked at Dumbledore. "Everyone who loves me dies."

"That's not TRUE!" Ron cried, coming towards him. "She is NOT dead! I'm not DEAD! Mom, Dad, Fred, and George are NOT dead!" He gestured towards Dumbledore. "Dumbledore is NOT dead!"

"He's right, Harry." Dumbledore said firmly.

Harry recoiled and felt his eyes burn. "Is she... is she... in pain?" he whispered.

Dumbledore shook his head. "She looks Petrified, I realize that."

"No. When people were Petrified, they didn't look like they were in pain."

Ron covered his mouth with his hands, looking terrified. "Dumbledore just said she isn't in pain... right?"

Dumbledore led Harry back over to Hermione. "She may be able to hear you," he said. "I can't, honestly, tell you what she's feeling. Madam Pomfrey gave her a sedative that should prevent her from feeling anything. How it is working, I cannot tell you."

Dumbledore held out Harry's wand. "I'm trusting you," he said, before giving it to him. "That you will not use this to avenge Hermione's attack in any way."

Harry nodded bleakly before accepting it. Dumbledore closed his hand around it before sweeping out of the room. Once he was gone, Harry noticed the penetrating silence, broken only by Ron's loud breathing.

With fear, he raised his eyes to Hermione's face. Her eyes were closed, her cheeks red, and her mouth contorted in a grimace. He swept his eyes down her form, her fists were clenched at her sides, but he was comforted by the way her chest rose up and down. He swallowed, reaching out and placing his palm against her cheek. Her skin was warm, and slightly clammy under his hand.

He heard Ron rustle beside him and he turned to find Ron holding out a box of tissues. "I thought you might... err... need these."

Harry was again reminded that he was still crying. Taking a tissue, he quickly wiped his cheeks and blew his nose, but still couldn't seem to control his tears. "Don't tell, Malfoy," he whispered, his voice breaking slightly.

"Wouldn't dream of it." Ron crouched down beside him, examining Hermione. "Looks sort of Petrified, doesn't she?"

Harry shook his head and gently smoothed a lock of hair behind her ear. Moving to her fists, he straightened each of her fingers one by one, until they looked almost normal. "She's just unconscious. I couldn't have done that if she'd been Petrified."

Ron still looked uncertain. "Not very reassuring that they don't have the faintest idea of what she'd been hit with, is it?"

Harry only shook his head, feeling completely helpless.

"Dumbledore told us to talk to her, though, didn't he?" Moving forward, Ron took her hand before glancing back at Harry, slightly embarrassed. "Is this... does this... do you mind?"

Harry just shook his head. "It's fine," he said, his tongue feeling thick. "I hope that she knows you're here."

Ron nodded. "Hermione," he said, watching her face slightly for signs of a reaction. "We're both really worried about what happened to you. Harry was so upset that he nearly attacked Dumbledore. And he's bawling all over the place, you've turned him into quite the girl." Ron paused, looking sad. "Don't worry about getting your homework done, either. Every teacher knows you're way ahead, they'll probably give you an "Outstanding" just for lying here and not doing anything. Of course, we'll still get all your homework for you because I know that you hate it when you think you've fallen behind."

Ron stared miserably down at her. "We really need you, Hermione. So please wake up soon. Please..." Ron looked horrified when his voice began to crack. He stood up quickly. "I'm going to the bathroom." Covering his eyes, he rushed off, leaving Harry alone.

Harry, glancing to make sure he was really alone, climbed gingerly on the bed next to her. He turned on his side so that he was facing her. Glancing behind him again, Harry gently stroked his hand through her hair.

"I'll find out what happened to you," he whispered fiercely. "I promise. And no one will ever come near you again. I'll follow you around everywhere, you won't be able to get rid of me. I'll even go to the

library with you and help you study. Just as long as you're safe. That's all that matters."

His only response was the slight rise and fall of her chest. He started crying again, his tears sliding off his chin and landing in her hair. Cupping her cheek, he pressed a kiss to her mouth, willing for anything to stave off the look of pain that was written there. She didn't respond, and he pulled away to find her face still wearing the same look of horror. Feeling the hope die inside him, he tried talking again, his voice coming out in short bursts and sounding slightly panicky.

"I know that I've sort of made a mess of things for us, but I'll be better. I won't ever be moody or angry again. Ron and I are starting to get along better, now, too. Sending me flying really seemed to do wonders. So, you see, Hermione, you have to wake up. You're missing out on so much just lying there." His voice cracked. "Just... please let me know you're in there. Let me know you can hear me, that you'll be okay. Please, Hermione. I need to know... please..."

Harry listened in breathless silence, waiting for something that would let him know that she would be okay. She didn't move. Harry let out a groan of pain, and put his head on her shoulder, breathing her in, and reassuring himself that she was still alive.

He felt her shift slightly. He looked up, hardly daring to believe that what he felt had been real. She shifted again, moving closer to him. He stayed absolutely still, watching her in breathless silence, feeling hope well inside him again. She let out a low moan and rolled towards him, curling up in his arms. Her face shifted, becoming more relaxed and she clutched his side, holding him against her.

Harry let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He tightened his arms around her, holding her close. He closed his eyes, breathed in her scent, and felt a powerful relief surge through his body. He kicked off his shoes and socks and, feeling more relaxed than he had in a long time, managed to fall asleep, Hermione tightly pressed up against him.

TBC

Harry could hear the muffle of voices. He shifted slightly, but didn't open his eyes, concentrating on getting his bearings. Hermione was still pressed tightly against him and Harry unconsciously gathered her closer, straining to hear what was being said.

"...Found them that way in the middle of the night," Madam Pomfrey said. "It certainly wasn't very appropriate, but considering the circumstances..." Madam Pomfrey cleared her throat. "He's the only one that seems to be getting any kind of response out of her..."

"Where's Weasley?" Someone... it sounded like McGonagall, asked.

"Sent him back to his dorm. Poor boy. Looked absolutely devastated when he walked in on them."

"Oh, I have no doubt he'll be back soon," Dumbledore said mildly.

In a hushed voice, McGonagall said, "Were you able to find out what curse that Jane Noxon girl used on her?"

Harry felt his skin prickle. The name sounded hauntingly familiar.

"Not, curse, Minerva," Dumbledore answered gravely. "Curses."

McGonagall gasped. "Dear Merlin."

Madame Pomfrey tutted. "Of course it was more than one. Overloaded her immune system, it looks like. She's in a type of coma, probably too painful to her to come out of it."

McGonagall sounded tearful. "Stupid, cowardly, idiot girl! She could have killed her."

"It's a wonder she isn't dead," Madame Pomfrey interjected.

Harry squeezed his eyes together, clinging on to Hermione. He felt lightheaded, and he listened very hard for the reassuring noise of her breathing.

"Albus, what was Miss Granger hit with?"

Dumbledore sounded tired. "First Noxon used a stunning spell. Hermione was shaken, but managed to put up a weak shielding charm..."

McGonagall clucked her tongue. "While her back was turned... bright, young witch Mr. Potter has there..."

"That shielding charm probably saved her life," Madam Pomfrey added, clearly impressed.

"Quite right." Dumbledore paused before continuing. "Noxon threw another stunning curse, followed by an expelliarmus, an impedimenta, and a stupefy."

"My God," McGonagall whispered in horror. "Miss Granger would have been completely defenseless."

Dumbledore sighed. "She was. Her wand was found 25 feet away from where Noxon left her."

"But Noxon didn't just leave it at that," Pomfrey added. "Once she had Granger unconscious she..." Pomfrey trailed off, too horrified to finish the thought.

Harry shifted again, desperately needing to know the real reason why Hermione was in a coma.

Dumbledore hesitated before he said, in a low voice that sent chills down Harry's spine, "She used crucio."

Harry was so shocked that he let out a loud gasp. The three adults turned sharply towards him, as if remembering for the first time that he was still there. Harry sat up quickly, his eyes wide. He stared at Dumbledore. "Crucio?" he whispered, pained. "She used crucio on Hermione?"

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I'm sorry, Harry."

Harry sat up straighter and shook his head. "But she couldn't have!" he yelled. "Only a really advanced wizard can use crucio! YOU'RE LYING!"

"Mr. Potter!" McGonagall cried, sharply. "That is no way to talk to the headmaster."

Harry was shaking and was horrified to find himself crying again. "NOT ON HERMIONE!" he hollered. "NOT CRUCIO!"

Professor McGonagall took a step back, her eyes filling with tears. "Oh, Harry... I'm so sorry..."

He wiped at his eyes, and clutched Hermione's hand. He looked fiercely at Dumbledore. "Is it true? Did she really use the cruciatus curse on Hermione?"

Dumbledore knelt down next to him. "Crucio isn't a particular difficult curse to learn, Harry. It requires knowledge, that is true, but more than anything else it requires hate. That is what makes it difficult for most witches and wizards to master. To feel a hate so bleak..." Dumbledore trailed off, his eyes sad. "That is something that most people never experience."

Harry hugged his knees to his chest, thinking about his own encounter with crucio. A darkened graveyard, Cedric's open, empty eyes, the pain that consumed all of him until he wasn't sure where it ended and he began...

Harry blinked back his tears and looked at Madam Pomfrey. "She will get better. She won't end up in a ward at St. Mungo's..."

Madam Pomfrey shook her head sadly. "There is no way to tell at this point."

"Noxon stopped when she realized that Hermione could be dead. In fear, she tried to run away from the castle." Dumbledore surveyed Hermione's still form with a look of deep concern in her eyes. "She did not get far."

Harry found his wand, clutched it. "What's going to happen to her?"

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Noxon has been sent home, stripped of all her powers, and forbidden to use magic again."

"That's not good enough," Harry whispered, thinking about the pain he'd seen on Hermione's face the night before.

Dumbledore peered at him shrewdly. "I'm afraid that it will have to do."

"No. That's nothing. She won't ever have to suffer like Hermione did."

Dumbledore sighed. "Nor should you want her to, Harry. Noxon will have to live with what she has done. She will never again be accepted into the wizarding community."

Harry swallowed. "What about Azkaban?"

"Azkaban, Harry, is no longer the prison it once was. The Dementors have joined Voldemort."

Harry pondered that quietly. He turned back to Hermione and, oblivious to everyone else in the room, smoothed her hair back, studying her face. She looked calmer, but Harry could already see the remnants of the spell having lasting effects. What if she never woke up? What if waking up hurt her too much? He kissed her forehead, leaving his lips hovering over her skin for a moment before pulling away.

He turned back to Dumbledore. "If Hermione doesn't wake up, it's over," he said quietly. "I won't do it anymore. I won't stop until I've found Noxon. And I will kill her."

Dumbledore studied him, apparently considering the validity of his words. His eyes filled with disappointment. "Then," he said softly, "let us hope that Hermione awakens." He got up and swept out of the room, Harry's eyes following his retreating back.

Ron passed Dumbledore on his way in. He took one look at the faces of everyone in the room, his eyes landing on Harry's face. "Okay. What did I miss?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing. I'll fill you in later."

Ron nodded. "How is she?"

"Still unconscious."

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. "You two have class starting in," she checked the clock. "Ten minutes."

"I'm not going," Harry said flatly.

Ron glanced at him and seemed to summon up his courage. "Me neither."

"Don't be ridiculous, Potter. Miss Granger will be fine. If there is any change in her condition you will be notified, I assure you."

"I'm not going."

Professor McGonagall met his challenging gaze. "This is not your choice to make."

Harry took Hermione's hand. "She knows I'm here, I can feel it. Madam Pomfrey said it herself, I'm the only one that Hermione responds to. I won't leave her here alone." Harry felt his throat constrict painfully. "I know what she's going through," he said quietly. "I won't leave her." Harry glanced back up, disinterested. "Make Ron go, if you want."

Ron looked betrayed. "What???" he cried. "What do you mean, 'make me go?' You're NOT the only one here that cares about her!"

"FINE!" McGonagall yelled, throwing her hands in the air. "However, you will BOTH be collecting your work at the end of every day. If either of you so much as slips one grade in ANY class, your visiting

privileges will be revoked." And McGonagall swept around, stalking out of the room.

Madame Pomfrey shook her head. "It's not as if you're the only who ever had a loved one end up in this hospital." When Madame Pomfrey shifted towards them, Harry held Hermione's hand tightly, his gaze threatening. "Well, if you want her to recover, you will let me check her over."

Ron moved over to them. "Not that I'm not still bloody angry for that comment you made, but go... have breakfast or something. I'll stay with her." Harry looked up, slightly suspicious. Ron sighed. "I promise I won't snuggle, okay? Just change or..." he frowned. "Shower or something."

Harry nodded slightly. "Hold her hand," he commanded. "Tell her that it's going to be okay because she's..." Harry trailed off, caught Ron's eye. "I need to fill you in on everything but I want you to know... despite what I told McGonagall... I'm really glad you're here."

Ron nodded and took her hand, slightly bewildered as Harry went rushing off. "Cracking up, that one..." he muttered.

Madame Pomfrey tutted. "Using crucio!" she muttered under her breath. "Letting students skip classes to stay in the hospital wing! Students sharing beds! The state this school is coming to... disgraceful... absolutely disgraceful..."

Ron let her angry words wash over him, slightly comforted by Madam Pomfrey's brusque, but caring manner. Then, it hit him. "CRUCIO!" he hollered, horrified. "WHAT ABOUT CRUCIO???"

When Harry returned 20 minutes later, Ron all but pounced on him. He let Ron hold onto Hermione for a while as he stalked around the room, sharing everything that he'd heard that morning. Ron listened impassively, his mouth hanging open. Harry stopped his pacing when he finished and turned to look at him sadly.

"I can't believe that you told Dumbledore you'd kill her if Hermione didn't wake up," Ron said, in a hushed voice. "Are you mad?"

Harry resumed his stalking. "Maybe. Probably. I don't know... it comes over me, I can't really help it."

Ron shook his head, slightly impressed. "I can't believe McGonagall's letting us stay here."

"She knows I wouldn't have left." Harry replied, coming to stand next to him. "Besides, she feels bad for me. They all do."

Ron nodded. "Yeah. I don't," he added hastily. "I personally think that you put a love spell on her. Who in their right mind would go out with you?"

"Thanks, Ron. Really."

Ron grinned. "I guess I'm just jealous that she doesn't notice me the way she knew you were there. I keep trying to get a response out of her but... nothing."

Harry sat carefully next to her on the bed. "She hasn't moved at all since last night. I think she knows we're here. I just... it's painful for her. Yesterday... she let me know. Because I needed it. But I don't want..." he swallowed. "I don't want her to hurt, just so we know that she's still..."

"Alive?" Ron finished, bleakly.

Harry shrugged. "That she's still... aware."

"Harry?"

Harry glanced over at him. Ron was still holding her hand, a look of intense concentration on his face. He avoided his eye. "What's it like? Crucio. I mean... when she wakes up... is she going to be..."

"I don't know." Harry answered honestly. He stared down at the bed, and spoke for Hermione's benefit as well as Ron's. "It's consuming... it's pain so much that all you want is to die because not feeling anything would be better."

Ron didn't look at all reassured. In fact, he looked close to throwing up.

Harry fiddled with the sheet. "But... when it ends, and you're still alive... it's a powerful feeling. Because when it ends you know the last thing you want is to let it get the better of you. So you try and hold on to what you are... who you are... even when it's impossible to remember your first name." Harry shuddered. "I'll never forget it, but I am so glad to be alive...."

Ron nodded. "But... but... how long did You-Know-Who have you for?"

"I don't remember. Time stops. It felt like forever, though, I imagine it probably wasn't long at all. Of course," Harry added, his face turning into a grimace. "He didn't first hit me with a slew of stunning curses."

Harry blinked at Ron for a moment, as if coming back to himself. "Ron do you think it would be okay if... I held her hand for a while?"

Ron jumped up, moving out of the way. He looked slightly embarrassed. "Yeah, of course."

Harry gathered up her hand, holding it inside both of his own. "It'll be okay, Hermione," he whispered fiercely. "I understand but... when you come out... it'll be okay."

For a week, Harry rarely left Hermione's bedside. Mdm Pomfrey refused to let him sleep next to Hermione, but she let him sleep in an armchair in the room. Ron went back to the dorms at night, claiming that the smell of hospital was driving him crazy. Every morning Harry would steal away for 20 minutes to change, eat, and shower. He refused to leave unless Ron was there, claiming that he didn't trust anyone else to be with her.

To everyone's surprise, they managed to keep up with their schoolwork. Even more surprising, it was mostly due to Harry's tenacity. Some rather large part of him felt that Hermione would strangle him if she found out he wasn't keeping up... if for nothing else than for her own sake. So he spent much of his time with her reading his assignments aloud and going through them step by step until both he and Ron understood. He hoped that she could hear everything he was saying and that she wouldn't feel too far behind when she awoke.

She hadn't so much as twitched a muscle since Harry's first night with her. It made everyone, Ron and Madam Pomfrey included, very nervous. However, Harry still strongly believed that she only moved because he'd needed it and would do so again should the situation call for it. He was determined to let her wake up on her own.

Neville spent most of his free time in the hospital wing. He'd bring them all their assignments, along with food and mail. Harry was touched, though slightly surprised that he had yet to lose anything important. Neville seemed to set that as a personal goal for himself. "I'm not going to let her down," he told them constantly. "You two are the most important people in her life, and if she's not going to look out for you, then I will."

Malfoy had tried to get in to taunt him. The enchanted room, however, was doing an excellent job. It somehow seemed to sense the bond between Harry and Hermione and, though Malfoy hadn't come to attack Hermione, he had come to wish harm upon Harry. The room seemed to take it personally and, as soon as one of his feet crossed the threshold, flung him all the way back into the hall. After laying in a dazed heap for a half-hour, Malfoy gave up and hadn't been back since.

The only real light to the entire situation that Harry could see was that it somehow managed to put his and Ron's friendship back to normal. Ron confessed that he was still angry, that he would be angry for a while, but that Hermione was more important and that they had to get along for her sake, if for nothing else. He also added, with uncharacteristic seriousness, that he thought the entire ordeal was making Harry lose his marbles and he wouldn't just let Harry succumb to it alone.

Harry, for his part, was more than relieved to have Ron nearby. He was sometimes afraid that he really was losing it. He'd spend long moments just staring off into space, a blank look on his face. But Ron would jab him with his wand, slap him on the back, and tell him that if he was lucky enough to have Hermione the least he could do was stop bloody crying all over her all the damn time.

After eight days of the routine, Harry was surprised to find himself shaken awake one morning by Ginny Weasley. He looked at her through blurry eyes, groping for his glasses, when she held them up and hooked them on his nose. "Good morning!" she said cheerfully.

Harry yawned sleepily. "Waz goin' on?"

Ron entered the room and let out a bark of laughter. "Jeez, Harry, how late were you and Hermione up last night?"

Harry glared at him and tried to get his bearings. "What are you doing here?" he directed at Ginny.

She looked a little nervous. "Well... you know... it's... well... it's... the... um... Quidditch... match... today. Against Slytherin."

"I'm not going," Harry responded quickly.

Ron and Ginny looked at him, slightly panicked. "What d'you mean, you're not going?" Ron asked.

Harry gestured to Hermione. "I'm not leaving her."

"WHAT?" Ginny cried, flabbergasted. "You can't be serious! We need you, Harry!"

"Get someone else to play Seeker." He jerked his shoulder. "You can do it."

"I'm a Chaser!"

"Then Ron'll do it."

"I'm Keeper, Harry! For God's sakes, man, wake up!"

Harry took his usual spot next to Hermione on the bed. "I'm not going," he repeated.

"But you're our Captain, Harry!" Ginny wailed. "We can't do this without you!"

"Then forfeit."

"To Slytherin?" she mumbled, aghast. "You want us to purposely lose to Malfoy?"

Harry shrugged. "Then play. I don't care. There are more important things than Quidditch."

Ron's eyes got very wide. "More important things than Quidditch?"

"Harry, this isn't healthy!" Ginny wailed. "Hermione wouldn't want you to do this. Your life shouldn't just stop because hers has! You've barely left this room for over a week! It's not good for you to be in the hospital this long when you're not even sick!"

"I think she's right, Harry," Ron said quietly. "This isn't healthy. You need to keep living."

"So Quidditch is more important than Hermione?" Harry snapped.

Ron flinched. "Nothing is more important than Hermione," he said. "But I don't think this will help her any. She'd want you to play, Harry."

"You just want to win the cup," Harry responded, nastily.

Ron stood up. "You know what? Forget I said anything. You just stay here, Ginny and I will go tell the rest of the team that we have to forfeit because you were too much of a coward to leave the safety of these walls."

Harry rubbed his temples, wearily. "Ron, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. But I can't leave her. I can't. What if she wakes up while I'm gone?"

"Then you'll get a pleasant surprise when you return."

Harry turned, surprised to find Professor McGonagall in the doorway. "I agree with Ginny Weasley here, Potter. This has gone on far too long and we've all turned a deaf ear because we felt terrible for you." She studied him until he squirmed uncomfortably. "I don't want to force you to play Quidditch, Potter. But I am forcing you to leave this room for at least an hour. If you don't, all your visiting privileges will be revoked. Am I making myself clear?"

Harry stared moodily at the ground. "Loud and clear."

"Good," she said briskly. "And I, for one, am certainly hoping you'll go out to the Quidditch pitch. It may do you some good."

Ron watched him carefully. "She'll be fine, Harry. The room is working great. Remember Malfoy? No one who means her harm is getting in."

Harry pondered Hermione's still form. "Okay," he finally said, and Ron and Ginny shot him hopeful looks. "Let's get this over with quickly. Ron, get us our Quidditch robes from our dorm. Ginny, get the team together."

They hurried off and Harry gazed at Hermione. "If you can hear me, I'll be back soon, I promise. I just... maybe they're right. I should get out of here for a while..." Bending down, he pressed his lips to hers for a moment before rushing off.

Outside the sun's rays made him squint. The conditions were perfect for Quidditch. Minimal breeze, not too hot, not too cold... it should have been every captain's dream. Harry was far from noticing.

Breezing into the Gryffindor locker room, he found his entire team assembled, their faces long and worried. Their eyes lit up with hope when they saw him. Harry could hear the familiar bangs and yells of the crowd gathering over their heads. Everyone's faces were drawn and nervous. Harry couldn't feel his nerves at all. He was sure they were still in the hospital room with Hermione. He closed his eyes for a moment, overcome by an intense need to have her out in the stands, ready to cheer him on. She said that watching him play terrified her, but that she would go as long as he was playing because it was important to show that she supported him.

He opened his eyes and gathered his Quidditch robes from Ron. "As many of you know," he said, fastening them on. "I've spent the last week in the hospital with Hermione. And," he added, "I'm only here because I have to be."

"Nice speech," Ginny said loudly.

Harry shot her a look. "We will win this match," he said, looking into each face, one by one. "And we will win it quickly. No one will make any mistakes, no one will let a single Quaffle through. We are going to play the best game of Quidditch that we have ever played in our lives. We are going to break every record this school has." The roar of the crowd increased above them. "Do you hear me?" Six faces stared determinedly at him. Harry nodded. "Good."

Harry shook hands with the Slytherin captain, completely ignored all the taunts Malfoy threw in his direction, and was the first to kick off the ground when Madam Houch blew her whistle. He flew up as high as he dared, putting the entire game out of his mind, and concentrated on finding the Snitch. He tuned out the loud cheers in the crowd, keeping his ears attuned for the slight whistle of the Snitch.

Below him, he could vaguely see that his team had taken his message straight to heart. Ginny had already scored twice. Ron had made three huge saves. Malfoy kept getting Bludgers hit in his

direction. Slytherin players were flying all over the stadium, trying in vain to keep up with the Gryffindor's faster play.

Harry shut his eyes, concentrating. Malfoy shot by him, crackling. "Taking a nap, Potter?"

Harry squeezed his eyes even tighter together, trying desperately to listen to each nook and cranny of the stadium. Then he heard it. The light whine of the snitch. Eyes flying open, he saw it right away, hovering near the Gryffindor bleachers on the ground.

Harry took off. He'd never willed his Firebolt faster. He could see the earth rushing up to meet him, and he could vaguely hear Malfoy yelling in the distance. The crowd gasped aloud, wondering what he was doing. Harry could see the snitch, just above a blade of brown grass.

The ground was only a few feet away, if he kept going too fast, he would hit it. He forced himself to keep going until the scent of the earth hung in his nostrils. He pulled his broom up, inches above the ground, and swept his hand through the grass, closing around the snitch as he went. He tumbled to a stop, careened off his broom, and held his Snitch out.

The crowd went wild.

"Harry Potter has caught the snitch!" the announcer cried jubilantly. "In a game for the history books, Gryffindor has won 210 to 0! In... oh my... only 3 minutes and 43 seconds. That's got to be some kind of a record!"

The rest of the team landed, grinning broadly. "All right, Harry!" they cried, beaming.

Harry barely noticed them. He gathered up his broom, handed the Snitch back to Madam Hooch, and took off back toward the castle, the screaming from the game fading. His stomach clenched painfully, overcome with sudden fear. He began running, desperate to get back. Something was wrong, he could feel it. While they'd all been down at the Quidditch game, someone had snuck into the infirmary unseen...

Head full of horrible images of Hermione being attacked while he was away playing Quidditch assaulted his brain. If anything had happened to her, it would all be his fault. What good would he be at protecting her if he left her to play Quidditch? He rounded the final bend, put on a burst of speed, and threw the hospital wing's doors open. He nodded curtly to Madam Pomfrey before diving into Hermione's secluded room.

She was still lying in the same position, unmoved, her chest going up and down, and her hands lying calmly at her sides. No one had been there. No one had seen Hermione while she'd been away. He'd imagined it all.

Harry, feeling ill, sank into his chair next to her bed and covered his face with his hands. "What's wrong with me?" he whispered, to the empty air. Ginny, Ron, and McGonagall were right. This couldn't be healthy. "Hermione, you'd best wake up soon. Because I'm starting to go crazy."

He thought he saw her eye twitch, but, when nothing else happened, figured he was imagining that, too.

Harry looked up suddenly, hearing a squish, squish noise. The entire Gryffindor Quidditch team, wearing matching, beaming smiles stood in the entrance to Hermione's room. Harry felt himself smile. "Hey guys," he greeted, quietly.

Ron smiled back at him. "We thought you could use some company."

"Plus!" Ginny added. "Time to celebrate!"

"Oh, yeah!" Gregory Smith, one of their beaters, chimed in. "Professor McGonagall said that we broke all kinds of school records." His eyes lit up. "Then she started to get all teary, said quite a lot of nice things about you, Harry."

"It was really quite disgusting," Ron said.

"She's, uh, very proud of you, Harry." Ginny said.

The entire team nodded as one. "That was quite the inspirational speech," David Green, a chaser, said.

"Nearly brought tears to my eyes." Ron said. "Plus, Hermione did okay, didn't she?"

Harry nodded tiredly. "I didn't, though."

The team shared worried looks. Ginny approached him slowly. "It's natural that you'd be worried."

"Panicked," Harry said. "I was in a panic... I was so sure that something had happened..."

Ron sighed. "Harry, it's okay. Look... the only reason I'm not as messed up over this whole thing is because you're more than messed up enough for the both of us."

"Thanks, Ron. That made me feel loads better."

Ginny shot her brother an irritated look. "Harry... you know better than all of us what she's going through. Just because you're acting a tad obsessive doesn't mean..."

Harry stood up. "Okay, I know you guys are trying to help and all, but..."

"We'll shut up," Ron said quickly.

"And pass the Butterbeer!" David Fury cried out, pulling a bunch of bottles out from under his robes.

Harry looked at it hesitantly and then glanced at Hermione. "Aww, come on, Harry," Ron needled. "Hermione would have wanted you to celebrate. Probably be damn proud of you, too." He grinned wickedly. "That is, if she hadn't had a near heart attack watching you go into that dive."

"Ron, shush," Harry said faintly. "She might hear you."

They all stared at him.

"It was a joke," Harry said, a little weakly.

"It was a nice dive," said their youngest player, Christine Turner, a second-year who played chaser with Ginny and Gregory Smith.

There was a general nod of agreement. Harry reluctantly allowed himself to be pulled into a Butterbeer drinking game, and soon they were all giggling and rolling around on the floor.

"The look on Malfoy's face!" Ron yelled out.

They all hooted with laughter and decided that Hermione should land in the hospital before every game, just so they would always be that inspired. Harry halfheartedly tried to curse them with his wand, but the room did it for him, by throwing out Gregory Smith (who had made the comment) and everyone who had laughed at it. Harry, much to his chagrin, also found himself lying in a tangle of arms and legs outside the hospital wing. This only managed to send them into further hysterics and it was quite a while before they managed to calm themselves.

Finally, Madame Pomfrey grew tired of their antics and threatened to kick them all out. "My patients need REST!" she yelled. "And don't think for one minute that I won't throw the whole lot of you out of here (yes, even you, Potter) because no one can sleep with the way you're carrying on!"

The team nodded and filed out of the hospital wing, patting Harry happily on the back as they went. Once the Butterbeer and the cheer was gone, Harry felt himself fall into a stupor again. He looked at Ron, who had taken a seat next to Hermione and was reading from their History of Magic textbook.

Ron shook his head. "I can't believe it, Harry. She finally managed to get me to do my History of Magic homework. Bloody miracle. Book's almost as dull as Binns himself and that's saying something."

Harry nodded. "Ron, I think I need to get out of here for a while. Maybe eat dinner at the Great Hall. I dunno."

Ron set the book down. "I think that would probably be a good idea."

"Will you stay with her? I don't want her to be alone... and I don't really trust anyone else."

Ron scowled. "Of course I'll stay with her. Don't know why you're so trusting, though. Planning on telling her what a great big git you are, you know. Maybe when she wakes up she'll have a change of heart."

"Yeah. Okay."

Ron frowned, suddenly worried. "Did you even hear any of that?"

Harry sighed. "I heard all of it. And I think you're right."

Ron looked even more worried. "Right about what?"

Harry shrugged and got up. "It should have been you."

And he left, leaving Ron staring open mouthed at his back. "Totally mad, Hermione," he muttered to her still form. "I mean, you were always mental. But he's lost all his marbles. Really quite sad, actually." Ron blinked at her for a moment and shook his head. "Do you know? I think he might just be a little in love with you."

Hermione let out a small moan.

Ron stared at her, his eyes widening. "Blimey!" he cried, tumbling backwards. "HARRY?" he shouted, looking frantically around the abandoned infirmary. "MADAM POMFREY!"

Ron was afraid that maybe she had decided to go to the Great Hall and eat as well, or something, because it took her a good five minutes before she stuck her head boredly into the room. "Yes, Weasley?"

Ron's finger shook as he pointed to Hermione. "I think..." he gulped. "I think she's waking up."

Harry barely picked at his food. Dinner should have been a festive occasion. It was for most of the Gryffindors. They were all still talking about his incredible Quidditch victory that afternoon. He'd even received a loud roar of applause (the Slytherin table notwithstanding, of course) when he'd entered.

It made him feel slightly sick. He should be down in the infirmary, by Hermione's bedside, doing his homework quietly with Ron and pretending that their friendship was as strong as it ever was. Instead he was in the Great Hall, picking at food that he didn't want, listening to people go over every sordid detail of the Quidditch match, and feeling increasingly guilty.

Of course, he felt guilty every time he looked at Hermione, as well, so it wasn't actually that big a change. His stomach turned over thinking about what he'd said to Ron. Because, in his heart of hearts, he knew the truth. If Hermione had been dating Ron, she would not have ended up in the hospital, she would not have faced crucio, and she would not be in a coma.

By rights, she shouldn't have ended up with him at all. She'd liked Ron, she'd said so herself. Ron liked her. How she ended up snogging Harry in the common room one night was a complete and utter mystery.

He looked up suddenly, feeling eyes on him. His gaze traveled through the Great Hall and he went very still.

Snape.

Harry felt like someone had dumped a bucket of cold water over him. The anger that surged through him was hot and powerful and a welcome relief to the nagging guilt. Why hadn't he realized it before? Why hadn't he remembered? Snape was the one who had read their note. Snape was the one who let the entire school know that he and

Hermione were an item. Snape was the reason Jane Noxon ever found out about it. Snape was the reason Hermione was in the hospital.

Harry sat up straighter, his eyes narrowing as he met Snape's eyes. He felt shaking anger. Everything could have been prevented. None of this had to have happen. If Snape had just kept that damn note to himself, had just given them detention or taken points or sent them into the damn Forbidden Forest, none of this would have happened.

Harry grabbed his wand and left the Great Hall, amidst loud bursts of applause and cheer. He ignored it. He climbed up to the Gryffindor common room, which was, thankfully, empty. He paced back and forth, his entire body shaking, the anger burning in his gut until he felt bile rise in his throat.

Resolved, he set off for the dungeons. His head buzzed in slight fear and some part of him recognized that if Snape didn't kill him, Hermione would. He didn't care. Reaching the Potions' room, he was too agitated to sit and he paced back and forth, wanting Snape to appear so he could stop feeling so angry, stop feeling that desperate urge that someone had to pay.

He didn't have to wait long. The slight shaking of the floor above him alerted Harry to the fact that dinner was over and students were returning to their dorm rooms. Harry turned to the door and waited. He clutched his wand in his hands, feeling lightheaded.

When Snape entered, Harry felt smug to see him slightly surprised for once. He quickly pushed the surprise away and his lip curled. "Potter. What an unpleasant surprise. What do you want?"

Harry's hands were shaking. "It's your fault," he said quietly.

Snape looked slightly taken aback. "What are you talking about?"

"Hermione," Harry answered calmly, willing his body to stop shaking. "You read that stupid note and now she's in the hospital! She was stunned and tortured and went through unspeakable pain. AND IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT!"

Snape's nose flared warningly. "Much of the faculty in this school believe that you should be given special... allowances... for your grief. I do not, Potter. And I will not allow you to speak to me in that tone."

Harry kicked one of the desks. "YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO READ THAT NOTE! HERMIONE DOESN'T DESERVE IT!"

"Don't you dare raise your voice to me." Snape advanced on him. "It was my fault, was it, Potter? And who was the one who wrote the note in the first place? Who was the one who put it down on paper for everyone to see?" Snape shook his head in disgust. "This is far from being my fault."

Harry couldn't think. He could hear a loud roaring in his ears. It was Snape's fault... it was Snape's fault... it was Snape's fault.... He raised his wand.

Snape's mouth curled into a contorted smile. "Oh, please, go right ahead. It would only make me too happy to be the one that finally enjoys expelling you, Potter."

Harry blinked and closed his eyes, willing for his head to stop roaring so loud. He slowly lowered his wand.

Snape regarded him icily for a few more moments. "Very well. Hand me your wand."

Harry recoiled, pulling his wand close to his chest. "No."

Snape's eyes glinted in the dark. "If you think that you can go around threatening teachers at your whim, you are very much mistaken. You and I will be taking a trip to see the Headmaster. Hand over your wand, Potter."

Harry gritted his teeth. Humiliated, he held it out. Snape snatched it from his hand, a self-satisfied leer on his face. Snape prodded him with his own wand. "You first."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest, suddenly feeling vulnerable and tired. Staring at the ground he allowed Snape to steer him through Hogwarts' corridors, towards Dumbledore's office. Never before had he wished so much for Hermione. She was the only one who always knew what to say when he was upset. She was the only one who wouldn't let him get away with hiding or blaming other people.

Snape jabbed him none too gently between the shoulder blades. "Move it," he hissed.

Harry picked up his pace, his legs feeling like rubber. People were staring at them now as they passed. Harry looked at the ground and tried to imagine what Hermione would say if she knew what he'd nearly done.

Attacking a Hogwarts teacher??? But you'll be expelled for sure, Harry! Then what will you do?

Snape jabbed him again and Harry suspected that it was just for pure amusement. They reached Dumbledore's office and Snape said the password in such a low voice that Harry couldn't hear it. Feeling dazed, Snape led him up the stairs. Fawkes squawked when she saw him and Harry smiled slightly, feeling as though he had at least one friend.

Dumbledore looked up from his desk and studied Harry and then Snape with a mild expression. "Severus, Harry, what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Don't move!" Snape barked at Harry before approaching Dumbledore with Harry's wand outstretched in his fingers. "Headmaster, I am decidedly sorry to report..."

Harry couldn't quite contain his snort.

Snape whirled around to glare at him. "Careful, Potter. You're already in enough trouble as it is." He turned back to Dumbledore and continued in hushed tones so that Harry couldn't hear him.

Harry didn't care. He wandered over to Fawkes and lightly stroked the bird's head. Fawkes leaned toward him, nuzzling his fingers affectionately. He heard Snape leave and didn't move. He continued to pat Fawkes, staring blankly off into space. He vaguely heard Dumbledore moving around.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Harry..."

Harry didn't turn. "I'm sorry, Professor," he whispered. "I'm very sorry."

To Harry's surprise, Dumbledore didn't yell, didn't express any disappointment, didn't even talk to him in that maddening calm-tone that always made Harry feel as if he'd done the most horrible crime in the world. Instead he came to stand next to him and held out Harry's wand. With slight amusement twinkling in his blue eyes, he said, "Harry, please try and refrain from threatening anyone with this thing for a while, hmm?"

Harry nodded bleakly, accepting the wand. He shoved it into his robes, comforted to feel its weight against him again. "I won't."

Dumbledore sighed. "Professor Snape tells me that you threatened to attack him."

Harry looked at him and decided to be honest. "I wanted to. I thought that it was entirely his fault for letting the wizarding community know about me and Hermione. But it wasn't his fault, really. We were the ones that wrote the note. I guess... I guess I needed to pretend that it wasn't really because of me that Hermione was tortured. Anything was better than the guilt."

"He also told me," Dumbledore continued, as if he hadn't spoken. "That you didn't."

Harry shrugged.

Dumbledore put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "It takes a very powerful wizard, indeed, to be able to see logic despite overpowering emotions."

Harry smiled slightly. "Hermione was always brilliant at that. She never lost her head. And she always let me know when I lost mine." Harry stopped. Thinking about Hermione was painful.

Dumbledore looked unbearably sad. "I never wanted you to grow up this fast."

Harry couldn't watch him anymore. He hated to see that Dumbledore was prone to the same emotions and weaknesses as everyone else. He stroked Fawkes again. "I think I grew up a long time ago."

"Harry... there is one thing that concerns me." Harry kept his eyes on Fawkes, certain that he knew what Dumbledore was going to say. It was something he'd been thinking himself.

What Dumbledore was going to say, however, was silenced with the entrance of Professor McGonagall. She hurried up the stairs, her cheeks slightly flushed. She broke out into a radiant smile as her gaze swept over the room.

"It's Granger," she said. "She's awake."

Meanwhile...

Ron thought that he had to be dreaming. Of all the times Hermione could have chosen to come out of her coma...

Hermione moaned again.

Madame Pomfrey gasped.

Ron glared at her. "I wasn't lying, you know!"

"Yes... of course, dear..." she replied, distracted. She hovered over Hermione, looking as though she wasn't quite sure what to do. Ron was horrified to hear her mutter, "Never actually believed the poor girl would wake up."

Ron shoved her out of the way. He grasped Hermione's hand and leaned forward. "Hermione?" No response. He tried again. "Hermione... it's me. Wake up. I know you're trying to."

He felt her hand clench around his. Ron peered at her hopefully.

"Harry?" she whispered, faintly.

Ron thought she might as well plunge a sword straight through his hear. It might have been less painful, actually.

He grit his teeth. "No," he said, trying to sound calm. "It's me... Ron. You know, red-hair, sometimes kind of an idiot, likes to bicker..."

Her lips curved into a slight smile. "Ron..."

Pleased, he nodded. "Yeah, okay, so you remember me. That's good. Um... let's see... how many classes are you taking this semester?"

Hermione's eyes opened, and she squinted up at him slightly bewildered. "Classes?" she said, sounding lost.

"Oh. Dear. Merlin." He gestured to Madame Pomfrey. "DO SOMETHING!" he hollered. "SHE CAN'T REMEMBER WHAT CLASSES SHE'S TAKING!"

Madame Pomfrey's eyes crinkled with worry. She felt Hermione's forehead. "It doesn't appear to be warm..."

Ron's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. "That's it?" he squeaked, in a choked voice. "That's the best you can come up with." He glanced at Hermione again, feeling increasingly panicked. "Bloody hell! Bloody, bloody, bloody hell! BUGGER! BUGGER! BUGGER!"

"I'll go... fetch a professor," Madame Pomfrey said faintly.

Ron stared open mouthed at her. "Yeah, you go do that!" he hissed, to her retreating back. "And I'll..." he trailed off, noticing that Hermione was watching him fearfully.

"Ron, where's Harry?" she asked, struggling to sit up. She winced in pain, and lay back down again. She shut her eyes tightly. "Things are so confused..."

Ron felt himself breathing heavily. "I can go find Harry if you want!" he shouted. "It's... he was right here a moment ago. He's barely left your bedside, really. I don't understand why he's not here! Bugger, bugger, bugger!"

Hermione gripped his hand with sudden, panicked force. "Don't leave... don't leave me alone..."

Ron tried to steady himself. "Okay. It's okay. Everything is fine. I'm not going anywhere, okay?" He sat on the bed next to her, smoothed down her hair. "See? I'm right here. You're not alone... you're very much not alone..."

Hermione's breathing was ragged. "Everything hurts... so very much... I don't really understand what happened... Ron?"

"Shhh," he said, trying to be soothing. "It's okay now. Nothing can hurt you."

Her eyes fluttered open again and studied his face. "What happened?" she swallowed. "Where's Harry?"

Ron felt his heart beating very fast. How the hell did he know where Harry went? "He'll be back soon, Hermione. Just... try and relax or something."

Hermione's eyes filled with tears.

The roar in Ron's head suddenly increased. Bloody, bugger, hell! "Don't cry..." he pleaded. "Harry'll be here any second."

Hermione sniffled. "I know... I remember. All of it. You and Harry, you've been here the whole time, and... and you read from your History of Magic textbook and..." she frowned. "You said Harry went into a dangerous Quidditch dive."

"Harry, Harry, Harry!" Ron snapped. "There are other people in the world! Sheesh!"

Hermione's grip on his hand, if possible, actually increased. "Is he okay? He's not blaming himself too much is he?"

Ron thought he might explode. "Well, I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

Hermione smiled, but closed her eyes in pain. "I'm glad you're here," she whispered.

Ron stared at her in surprise. "Hermione..." he whispered, a little hoarsely. "I am so glad that you're awake."

"You're just tired of taking your own notes."

"You found me out," he said softly, smoothing a hand over her brow. His eyes widened. "Bloody hell, Hermione, you're heating up. I can't believe that woman calls herself a nurse."

Hermione winced. "She's an excellent nurse. She just... doesn't really understand what to do for me, is all."

"Hermione," Ron said desperately. "I don't know what to do for you."

"You better think of something soon... because I think I might pass out."

BLOODY, BUGGER, HELL! Ron looked around the room, feeling his hands begin to shake. His gaze landed on the sink. "I'm not leaving," he said urgently, letting go of her hand. "I'm right here, I'm just going to the sink..." Ron filled a basin up with cool water and set a piece of cloth in it.

"Mum used to do this all the time when we got sick at the Burrow," he said, wiping down her forehead. "It really helped. She always said the common cold was the one thing that magic had yet to find a cure for."

"Modern science, too," she whispered, sounding distinctly fainter.

Ron didn't know what she was talking about. He hoped that it was some Muggle thing, and that she wasn't losing all her marbles. He wasn't planning on holding his breath, however. "Stay with me, Hermione," he pleaded, wiping down her forehead again.

She just nodded. "I really hope Harry gets back soon."

Ron resisted the urge to start cursing aloud again.

TBC

Harry could do nothing but stare stupidly at Professor McGonagall. "She's... she's what?"

"Awake, Potter. Madam Pomfrey just told me." McGonagall frowned. "Sounded quite shaken up, actually. I told her to get back down there and make sure Miss Granger wasn't in any pain."

Harry wasn't listening. Hermione was awake. Hermione had woken up. And he was just standing calmly in Dumbledore's office, like he'd just received word that a tree had fallen over or that it might rain later.

Hermione was awake.

His heart began pounding. "I have to... I have to..." he looked at Dumbledore. "Sorry, Professor," he said, before bolting.

Once again, he found himself running at top speed towards the hospital wing. Hermione had woken up and he hadn't been there. She was in pain and he wasn't there and how could he possibly be a good boyfriend when Hermione needed him and he wasn't there. He ran faster, only knowing that he had to get there because she was in pain and he had to do his best to make it go away.

He burst through the doors, ran through the infirmary's long corridor, passed the empty beds and came to a screeching halt outside Hermione's room. He stared. Ron was wiping down her forehead, one of her hands clutched tightly in his, his face near hers so that he could whisper soothing words.

Harry hadn't been aware that Ron knew how to be soothing.

He tried to swallow the lump that gathered in his throat. 'Just walk in,' a voice told him. 'He's her best friend, of course he'd do anything to make her feel better.' Harry continued to stare at them, feeling like he was witnessing something terribly intimate.

"HARRY!"

Harry started. Ron stood up, his face deathly pale. He looked hysterical.

"You're here," he said breathlessly. When Harry just stared at him, he yelled, "DO SOMETHING!"

Harry blinked, eyes traveling to Hermione. Her face was flushed, her breathing was ragged, but she was awake. He ran to her, feeling her forehead. "She's heating up!" he whispered urgently.

"I KNOW!" Ron wailed. "I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO!"

"Okay," Harry swallowed, trying to seem calm. "It's okay."

"THAT'S WHAT I'VE BEEN TYRING TO SAY!"

Harry shot him a look, before bending down, focusing on Hermione. He slid his palm down her cheek, feeling the heat under his hand. "Hermione," he said quietly. "Don't pass out again, okay? I need you to be strong."

Her eyes fluttered open in hope. "Harry?"

"It's me," he said, his voice cracking. "I'm here. I'm going to protect you."

She clutched at his hands. "I don't feel very well..."

"You're fine," Harry whispered. "Remember that. I'm going to take care of you."

She nodded. "I missed you."

Ron made a slight hissing noise.

Harry ignored him, staring at Hermione intently. "I wasn't ever far..."

"I know. I just... I wanted so badly to tell you... it would be okay. That I would wake up. But I couldn't...."

"Shhh," he said. He turned to Ron, who was looking at him rather heatedly. "Find Madam Pomfrey."

Ron glared at him and then glanced at Hermione. "Fine," he muttered. "But I'm doing this for her."

Harry grasped the abandoned washcloth and smoothed it over Hermione's forehead. "Is this even working at all?" he asked, slightly baffled.

"It feels nice... cool..."

She closed her eyes and Harry felt rising panic. "Don't, Hermione. Don't close your eyes."

"But I'm so tired..."

"I know!" he said, frustrated. "But you'll fall into a coma again and... I need you to stay awake."

"Tell me something. Quidditch. Your Quidditch game... you broke all kinds of records..."

Quidditch seemed like a hundred years ago. "Well," he said. "It was, um, Quidditch."

She smiled faintly. "Ron said your dive would have given me a heart attack."

"You could hear that?"

"I heard almost everything."

"Good. I was afraid Ron and I were doing all that homework for nothing."

"You two are talking again."

Eager to keep her awake, Harry squeezed her hand. "Yeah, he's been.... I nearly lost it when you came in here. I think he was the only one who wouldn't let me dig myself a hole of self-pity."

Harry looked up hopefully when Ron, Madam Pomfrey, Dumbledore, and Professor McGonagall entered. "She has a fever," he said hoarsely. "And she's in a lot of pain. She needs something..."

"Who are you, Potter, a Healer?" Madame Pomfrey sniffed, going to her cabinet. She unlocked it and took down a large purple bottle. Pouring the liquid into a teaspoon, she crouched down by Hermione's bedside. "Open!" Hermione opened her mouth obediently, and Madame Pomfrey dumped the liquid down her throat.

Hermione coughed violently, but swallowed. Harry felt a pang of fear, watching her eyes close.

"It's a pain blocker and a fever reducer," Madame Pomfrey shared. "I don't believe that it will send her back into a coma."

"BELIEVE?" Ron repeated, in mild horror.

Harry wasn't all that comforted himself. He glanced down at Hermione, who had drifted off. He was slightly amused to hear her snoring softly. "She's fine."

"Yes, but how do you KNOW?" Ron demanded.

Harry shrugged. "I just do."

Ron's mouth fell open. "Just because you and she are snogging, doesn't mean you can suddenly read her mind!"

Dumbledore coughed slightly. "If I may suggest, Ron, it might be a good idea if you went up to your dorm. You've been through a very trying day, rest might do you some good."

"If Harry's staying with Hermione overnight, then I am, too."

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. "I believe," she said icily. "That certain Heads of Houses need to give permission for that to happen."

"She seems fine... a little dazed maybe, but fine." Harry said, completely oblivious to everything going on around him. "She talked about... stuff that happened while she was unconscious and... I think she'll be fine."

Dumbledore not so subtly nudged Ron towards the exit. He grumbled but went, distinctly muttering, "Oh, Harry gets special treatment for snogging. Surprised Harry isn't shitting out gold or something..."

Harry barely noticed. "He's just a little angry with me," Harry explained, not seeming all that upset. "At least she's not in any more pain, right?"

Madam Pomfrey sniffed. "After the soother I just gave her? I would think not."

Harry nodded, feeling slightly relieved. He glanced accusingly at Madam Pomfrey. "You didn't think she'd wake up," he said quietly.

"Mr. Potter, if I had known what would happen, I would not be a school nurse. I'd be teaching Divination. And doing quite a good job of it."

Harry stopped listening. He held Hermione's hand and listened to her snore. He felt her forehead again. He was relieved to feel that it had cooled down significantly. He studied her face, trying to determine if she would have any lasting side effects.

He heard Dumbledore shoo everyone out the door. Madam Pomfrey gave him a reproachful look before leaving. "No sharing beds!"

Harry barely shrugged. He shut off the light in the room and knelt down next to Hermione again, planning on staying right where he was. He rested his head on the bed, closing his eyes. Though he was bone tired, he knew he'd stay awake until she needed him.

It was the early hours of the morning when Hermione awoke. Harry, who had yet to fall asleep, watched in horror as she let out a dull screech of pain and thrashed around.

"No... no... no..." she whimpered. "Not again..."

Harry felt a lump gather in his throat. "Hermione..." he whispered.

"What's happening?" she said.

Harry swallowed. "It's just a dream," he said, soothingly. "You're only dreaming..." He found her hand and squeezed it reassuringly. "Wake up..."

She opened her eyes, trembling and sweating. Her eyes lit up hopefully when she saw him. She threw her arms around his neck, pulling him down on top of her. "I don't understand... what's happening to me..."

He held her tightly. "Nothing. You're safe. No one is hurting you."

She trembled slightly, pressing her face into the hollow of his neck. "It's seems so real..."

"I know. I know. It's not, though. It's just a nightmare. You're safe, you're with me, and that's all that matters." Suddenly worried that he might be crushing her, Harry rolled over. Hermione whimpered and Harry quickly propped himself on his elbow so he could stare down into her face. "Shhh... I'm here."

She clutched at him weakly. "Harry?"

"Shhh..." he said again, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Everything's okay."

She took a deep breath and Harry could visibly see her will her body to calm down. He watched her in admiration and she slowly stopped trembling and her breathing returned to normal. She even smiled slightly. "This wasn't how I was planning on getting you in bed," she said, weakly.

Harry blushed. "You... ah... what was that, exactly?"

She smiled, curling up into his arms. "Nothing. I just feel a little silly, that's all."

He pressed her closer, her head resting on his chest. "Don't feel silly. Hermione... I understand."

She nodded. "I suppose you do."

Harry yawned sleepily. "Madam Pomfrey is going to kill me."

She grasped his shirt in one hand. "Don't leave."

"I'm not. I'm just saying... this might be the last night that we're together."

She looked up at him. "Well, if that's the case, do you think that maybe you could kiss me? It's been a while and I think that..."

"I would love to," Harry said with a grin, bending down.

Harry felt his knees weaken when their lips met. The kiss was tender and he closed his eyes, desperate to reassure himself that she was alive. He cupped her cheek, deepening the kiss. Her hands gripped the back of his neck, almost painfully. Their noses brushed slightly and Harry smiled against her lips. He pulled away, pressing kisses to her cheeks and the tip of her nose as her skin heated up under his touch.

"Oh, Harry..." she whispered.

He lifted his head up to peer at her. "What?"

"Don't stop!" she yelped.

"Oh... okay..." a lazy smile spread across his face, as he bent down, peppering kisses across her brow.

Her hands somehow managed to find their way into his hair, tickling his head and making him feel slightly giddy. She turned her face, meeting his lips again and they shared another long, lingering kiss.

"Oh... that was... that was..." she said breathlessly, when they parted.

Harry didn't say anything, as her hands were still in his hair and he found it very distracting. Bending down again, he trailed kisses down her neck, grinning slightly when she arched against him. His hands moved down her sides, resting on her hips. She squealed slightly, dissolving into laughter again.

"Harry... that tickles..."

Harry kissed her again, partly in an attempt to make her shut up, and partly because she tasted so good. He wondered, vaguely, if all girls tasted this good or if it was just Hermione and if it was just Hermione, why had he spent five years not kissing her every day?

He studied her as he pulled away. Her eyes were shining slightly in the darkness, her pose much more relaxed. Though she still pressed herself against him, she wasn't holding on like he might disappear at any moment. And, Harry discovered, she was grinning happily at him.

"You're such a guy," she said, sounding almost disappointed.

"I am not!" he cried, insulted, though not quite sure why he was insulted.

Her hands left his hair and traced over his face, her fingers tracing small patterns over his nose and cheeks. "You are, too."

Harry really wished she'd stop touching him so. It made him want to kiss her again. And though he could hardly see that as bad, he was fairly certain she was ready to talk. "Oh?" he managed.

"Yeah. You care more about snogging than... well... anything else, really."

Harry was forced to admit that she had a point. Her fingers were still tracing his face and he was trying very hard to pay attention to what she was saying. "It's because you're very kissable," he said, slightly breathless.

Her eyes twinkled happily at him. She finally lowered her hands to his shoulders so she could cuddle up to him. "You're very kissable, too," she replied, a smile on her lips.

Harry flushed and tried to make his head stop spinning. He wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his chin on her forehead. "When did I get taller than you?"

She shifted slightly. Harry found the move very distracting. "You've been taller than me for ages."

"Yes, but now I'm a full head taller than you and wider, too. And you fit really well against me, have you noticed that?"

She giggled. Hermione giggled. Harry had an inexplicable urge to make her giggle again. "It's called puberty. We mature, grow out of our childhood bodies..."

"Yeah," Harry said, grinning. "Puberty's all well and good if it means I'm allowed to kiss you."

Hermione giggled again and Harry felt an odd sense of victory. "See? Snogging. That's all you guys ever think about."

She was, as she most often was, right. He tried to ignore the way that she kept shifting against him and settled for running his hand up and down her arm. He shut his eyes, content at having her near, alive, and awake.

"Harry?" she asked, her tone hesitant.

He opened his eyes. "You want to know what it was like for me after Voldemort..."

She nodded. "I know... I heard you telling Ron about it, but I was just wondering... the nightmares, do they ever stop?"

"I don't know, Hermione."

She glanced up at him, her face thin and desperate for answers. "But for you... do you still have nightmares about..."

He shrugged. "I have lots of nightmares. Some of them are about Voldermort and when he tortured me. Some are about him killing Cedric. Some of them are about the night Voldermort killed my parents. Most of them are of Sirius dying..." he trailed off. "Recently they've been about you."

"Oh," Hermione whispered, faintly.

He tightened his hold on her. "It will never go away. You will always have to live with what happened. But you don't have to do it alone."

Hermione shivered slightly. "I can still... feel it. I've never felt anything more horrible. Why would someone want to inflict that kind of pain on another human being?"

Harry couldn't quite meet her eyes. "Hate, I guess. Hate that we can't even imagine."

Hermione pondered that quietly for a moment. "Then, I think it'd almost be worse, being the person using the Unforgivable Curse. Especially... understanding the pain that it causes..."

Harry tensed. "I did," he said softly.

She blinked at him in incomprehension. "What are you...." Harry met her eyes. "Oh, I see," she whispered, faintly. "When?"

"After Sirius..." Harry looked away from her, ashamed. "There was a moment when I wanted more than anything for Bellatrix to suffer for what she'd done. It didn't really work, though. It sort of sputtered out..."

"Look at me," Hermione said sharply.

Harry slowly met her gaze. Instead of the blame he expected to see, he saw her lips curve into a small, sad smile.

"So let me get this straight," Hermione said. "After you saw your godfather murdered in front of you, you were angry enough to use the cruciatus curse on his murderer. His murderer being someone that would have eagerly killed you, given the chance. But, most importantly, you're saying that it didn't work. That you tried the curse and that it didn't work."

Harry just nodded.

"Well, I don't think that has anything to do with your abilities, Harry," she said seriously. "You just don't have it in you to use the Cruciatus curse, that's all. Despite all the hate you were feeling at the moment... you still couldn't make it effective. That tells me a lot about you."

Harry buried his face in her hair and breathed deeply. "Thank you," he said, hoarsely.

She swallowed. "Do you blame yourself very much for what happened to me?"

He thought about lying to her, but he figured she would see right through it anyway. "Yes," he replied, tersely.

"Well, don't," she said, sounding irritated. "It's certainly not your fault that people are hateful."

"Hermione," he whispered, "this wouldn't have happened if you hadn't gone out with me. It might not have been my fault, but it was still because of me."

She pressed her cheek against his chest. "I don't blame you."

"I don't think I would be able to stand it, if you did."

"Well, it's not your fault," she said again. "And I wouldn't change what happened between us that night in the common room for anything."

"Yeah, that part was pretty good," Harry said with a grin. "Though, lying to Ron probably wasn't very smart. Passing notes in Snape's class was just downright stupid. And leaving you alone after that article came out was the most idiot thing I have ever done... and I've done a lot of really idiotic things."

"Harry," she said softly. "You can't protect me every minute of every day."

"Yes, I can," he replied stubbornly.

"No, you can't," she said witheringly. "And I wouldn't want you to, either. I'm more than capable of taking care of myself. I'm not completely stupid when it comes to defensive magic."

"I know," Harry said quietly. "Madam Pomfrey said that the only Noxon didn't...." He swallowed with difficulty. "She said that your shielding charm probably saved your life."

"You taught it to me. Last year... in D.A, you taught it to me."

"Well..." he said, with difficulty. "It just goes to show... I can and will protect you."

She smiled sweetly. "Really, Harry, you don't have to go for the whole 'protective male' thing. It's sort of... insulting, honestly. Like you think I'm not capable of taking care of myself."

Harry stared at her for a long time, all traces of good humour gone from his face. "You don't understand."

She blinked at him. "Don't understand what?"

"When I thought that..." Harry trailed off and started again. "If I thought about losing you... it was... terrifying. You don't... you didn't see what I went through when you were in here. It's not that I don't think you can't take care of yourself. I know you can. I just..."

"I understand," she said, interrupting him. "I do."

Harry wrapped her in his arms tightly and gently touched his lips to her forehead. "You can protect me, too," he finally said.

She snickered. "Merlin knows, you probably need more protection than I do."

"Haha," Harry muttered.

"We'll protect each other."

Her words sent a pleasurable warm feeling through Harry. "Hermione, that was so sappy. But... yeah, let's do that."

"Hey, Harry?" she asked, her tone slightly teasing. "Would you really have killed Jane Noxon had I never awoken?"

"Yes."

"That's very sweet. I mean, in an 'I'm Crazy and I Need to Enact Revenge' kind of way. Still... it's kind of sweet."

Harry sighed. "I dunno if I would've, Hermione. I'm trying not to think about what I would have done if she'd killed you, okay?"

She nodded seriously and relaxed into his arms, closing her eyes. "Good idea."

Harry enjoyed the way she felt in his arms. She was warm and so very soft, and he marveled again at how perfectly her body seemed to melt against his. He felt relaxed and peaceful, perfectly content to stay right where he was. Suddenly, Hermione burst out laughing and Harry gave a small start of surprise.

"I get it!" she said, laughing. "Why it doesn't make any sense! That I would end up with you..."

Harry frowned, totally bewildered. "Hermione, really... that's not very... nice."

"No!" she said, still laughing. "I mean, me! I understand, why people think it's so weird that we've ended up together. I mean, you're a hero and internationally famous and I'm just... plain, old, Muggle-born Hermione. The greatest thing I ever did was pass all my O.W.L.'s with flying colours. And you... you're Harry Potter. Well, it's just funny."

Harry didn't think it was very funny. "Hermione, what are you talking about? You're exactly who should be with me."

She suddenly went still. "Not according to most of the wizarding world."

Harry frowned. "Don't give me that," he said in a low voice. "You know me, you understand me. You're the only one who can see past the fame and the scar on my forehead. You see me for what I am... not the image. You're going out with Harry, just Harry. Not bloody Harry Potter."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Don't take that tone with me. I'm not stupid, I'm well aware of how I view you."

Harry felt frustrated. "Hermione, I'm telling you the truth," he said, quietly. "You know me better than anyone. Sometimes I think you are the only one that knows me."

He kissed her softly, driving the point home. He tangled his hands in her hair, gently nursing her mouth with his own. The kiss was slow and deliberate and Harry quickly lost himself in the warm taste of her mouth. He felt her heart thumping in her chest and she let out a tiny moan of pleasure. When Harry pulled away, he was hoping that she would let the subject drop.

It almost seemed as if she would. She leaned against him after the kiss, her eyes slightly glazed over and breathing harshly. Just when Harry thought he was free, she said. "I know. I guess I just understand how other people would look at us. And it is slightly ridiculous."

"It is not!"

She smiled charmingly. "It doesn't really matter what others think."

Harry, certain that he already knew that, and becoming increasingly confused, just nodded.

She yawned. "Don't listen to me, I'm just tired."

Harry didn't have the faintest bloody idea what she was talking about. He rubbed her back soothingly. "Hermione... would you please just... tell me what's wrong."

She just shook her head, leaning up to peck him on the chin. "Nothing. Nothing is wrong."

"Okay..." he replied uncertainly.

She frowned, closing her eyes. "How are things going with Ron?"

"Oh, well, they're, um... getting better... I think..."

"He was really wonderful to me when I first woke up. I think I terrified him slightly, but...."

Harry frowned. "Yeah, he's been fairly, well, mature... all things considered. He stuck by me, us, when you were in here. I know it hurts him to see us together."

"He'd do anything for either of us, Harry."

Harry smiled. "He would. I think it's just going to take him some..."

"Time?"

"Yeah."

Hermione sounded half-asleep when she said. "I thought I heard you guys getting along like normal."

Harry sighed. "Well, we would do our homework, or talk about what's wrong with you, or he would tell me that he thought I was going insane, but... besides our one match, we never really talked about Quidditch."

Hermione's eyes opened drowsily. "Quidditch? What does that have to do with anything?"

"If Ron and I can talk about Quidditch, then things are okay. Do you know how long it's been since he's asked me about the Chudley Canons?" Harry's voice tinged with regret. "If he can't ask me about his favourite Quidditch team it means my opinion means nothing to him."

Hermione contemplated that for a moment before frowning. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"Shut up," Harry said half-heartedly. "And go to sleep. You're exhausted."

"So are you."

"Fine," he replied. "I'll go to sleep, too."

"Well, if you really are going to be killed in the morning, I just want to say that I think Quidditch is an awfully stupid thing to hold back your friendship with Ron."

Harry knew she was right and that annoyed him. "Hermione, go to sleep," he said again.

She pressed herself tighter against him, closing her eyes. Within seconds, the sounds of her light snoring filled the room again and he smiled a little. Closing his eyes himself, he felt safer and more relaxed than he could ever remember being.

Something forceful poked Harry in the back of the head. He shifted slightly, trying to get his bearings when something hit him again. "Ouch!" he cried.

There was a muffled. "ARGH!" followed by a large crash.

Harry opened his eyes, squinting across the room. He groped for his glasses, found them lying on Hermione's side and pushed them up his nose. Disentangling himself from Hermione's arms without waking her, he sat up, eyes darting suspiciously around the room. He entered the hospital wing cautiously, anxious to see what all the fuss had been about. At the door to the infirmary he stopped dead in his tracks and hooted with laughter.

Ron was lying in the hallway, rubbing his head and looking very disoriented. "Bloody, enchanted room!" he yelled.

Harry gripped the nearest bed to keep himself from falling over as he roared with laughter.

Ron glared at him. "SHUT UP! SHUT UP! That hurt, you know!"

Harry couldn't speak.

"Fine!" he said crossly, getting up, still rubbing petulantly at his head. "I'm going to see Hermione."

Harry followed him, still grinning. He found Hermione awake, and even sitting up. She smiled when they entered.

"Ron!" she greeted cheerfully.

Ron rubbed at his head. "I don't understand why your room gets all bothered when someone pokes Harry. I mean, it doesn't seem fair that he gets special protection, as well."

Harry burst out laughing again.

Ron shot him an irritated look. "Just keep your mouth shut before I..."

Ron never got the chance to finish as he was thrown bodily out of the room again. He soared through air, yelling, and landed heavily in the hall.

That did it. Harry doubled over. He gripped his sides, unable to breathe.

Ron stomped back, scowling. He shot Harry a murderous glare, but didn't say anything. Still glaring at Harry, he stalked to Hermione's beside. "Suppose that would happen if someone wished me harm?" he muttered.

Hermione was biting her lip. Harry suspected it was because she was trying to keep herself from laughing. "I'm sure it would, Ron," she said, with an admirably straight face.

"Harry, point your wand at me or something."

Harry, finally able to get control of himself, came to stand at his elbow. "C'mon, Ron. I'm not that dense."

Ron's scowl increased. "Maybe we can get Malfoy in here to test it..."

Hermione, looking eager to change the subject, held out her hand. Ron blushed and took it. "Thanks for what you did for me yesterday," she said softly.

Harry watched them, trying very hard not to be (and failing miserably at it) jealous.

Ron's blush increased. "Oh, well, you know... I think quick on my feet."

Harry stared coughing violently to cover up for his snort.

Hermione beamed at him. "Well. Thanks. And for all the homework you guys did. I'm impressed, actually. I didn't know you had it in you."

"It was mostly me," Ron said seriously. "Harry doesn't have the best work ethic. But I said, 'Harry, Mate. Hermione would want us to read all these textbooks aloud to her. You know how she is...'"

Hermione looked pleased. "Really? That's very sweet of you, Ron."

Ron grinned. "Naww... without you here, Harry needed someone to help him keep up."

Hermione squeezed his hand. "I'm glad you were here."

They shared a smile and Ron blushed an even deeper shade of red.

Harry felt very much like killing him. Of course, he was smart enough to realize the room probably would throw him out if he tried any such thing. He tried to squelch his nagging jealousy, because he realized Ron probably needed to make himself feel slightly superior. Harry sighed when Ron began going on about single-handedly trying to stake out Jane Noxon himself to punish her.

"And then," Ron said, "I said to Dumbledore, 'You tell me where she is!' because I couldn't just let her get away with what she'd done to you. Of course, Dumbledore refused to tell me anything. So I had to go about it on my own. I rarely slept, choosing instead to stake out the castle, looking for clues...."

Harry and Hermione shared a look. She rolled her eyes slightly as if to say, 'I'm not completely stupid, but if it makes him feel better, let him go ahead.'

Harry felt slightly relieved. Giving Hermione a slight smile, he wandered idly around the room, waiting for Ron to stop babbling. After pacing around it for the third time he stopped dead. "Jane Noxon!" he whispered.

Ron jumped up. "Where?"

"No..." Harry trailed off, shut his eyes. He opened them, slightly horrified. "I remember where I've heard the name before! The Daily

Prophet article. Remember? She was the one who said all those horrible things about you, Hermione."

Hermione stared at him. "Yes, I know. I thought you did, too..."

Ron looked baffled. "You mean the article that was about you and Hermione getting together?"

Harry nodded. "I can't believe it... I should have known... I should have done something..."

"Oh, Harry, honestly!" Hermione said, airily. "What would you have done? You couldn't very well go around attacking Hogwarts students, especially for crimes they hadn't yet committed!"

Harry could admit that she had a point. It didn't make him feel any better, though.

The idea that his and Hermione's entire relationship would be portrayed in the Daily Prophet suddenly disturbed him another level. He hadn't really been paying attention, but Neville told him that the Daily Prophet was updating news about their relationship nearly everyday. At the time he'd been so worried about Hermione that he hadn't really noticed.

When Madam Pomfrey came in with the breakfast tray, Harry glanced at Hermione and Ron (who were still holding hands) and made up his mind. "I'll be right back," he told them, hurrying off.

He went to the Great Hall, where everyone was still in the midst of eating. He jogged over to the staff table, ignoring the looks that most of the students were giving him. Dumbledore looked up at him as he arrived.

"Good morning, Harry," he greeted. "How's Hermione doing?"

Harry shrugged. "She's fine."

Dumbledore peered at him through his glasses. "Something that I can help you with?"

Harry swallowed and nodded. "I was wondering... could I perhaps have a look at Hermione's mail? To, uh, bring it to her..." he added hastily.

Dumbledore looked faintly amused. "Of course," he said, summoning it up with a flick of his hand. Piles and piles of letters appeared on the table and Harry stared at it faintly, his eyes widening. Dumbledore followed his gaze. "Yes, the Prophet has many dedicated readers. I did, however, take the liberty of destroying any howlers that arrived."

Harry nodded, ripping open some of the letters. Some were bad, accusing Hermione of cursing Harry, some were more sympathetic, wishing her a speedy recovery.

Dumbledore watched him in guarded interest as he read through Hermione's mail. "Something bothering you, Harry?"

Harry didn't answer, rifling through Hermione's many Daily Prophets. There was an article about them nearly every day. Most said that she remained unconscious in the hospital, Harry staying obsessively by her side. Harry still felt that the Prophet made it seem an awful lot like she had to curse him to make him so devoted. Thinking about everything Hermione had gone through, Harry clenched the paper tightly in his hands.

"Professor," he said hesitantly. "I have... an idea. But I need your help."

"Are you sure about this, Harry?"

Harry looked up, feeling slightly queasy. He met Dumbledore's concerned gaze. He swallowed. "Yes."

There was a knock at Dumbledore's office door. Dumbledore nodded in its direction. "It's your show, Harry."

Harry got up hesitantly and went to open the door. In walked a long, thin woman with smooth, raven hair and sharp blue eyes. She peered

at him suspiciously as she entered, her eyes landing immediately on his scar.

"Good. It's you."

Harry's feelings of uneasiness increased. He nodded.

"Madam Snow," she said tersely.

"It's, uh, nice to meet you. I'm Harry—."

"Oh, I know who you are," she interrupted with a wave of her hand. "Let's get started, shall we?" she asked cheerfully.

"Uh... okay..."

Harry led her up the stairs and smirked inwardly when she noticeably deflated seeing Dumbledore sitting serenely at his desk, his hands folded one over the other. "Headmaster Dumbledore," Madam Snow said faintly. "I didn't realize that you would be here."

Dumbledore smiled warmly. "Harry asked me to accompany him during the interview. Who was I to deny him?"

Madam Snow's smile didn't reach her eyes. "Yes... I suppose..."

"Do you have any identification?" Dumbledore asked calmly. Madam Snow frowned. "You understand," Dumbledore continued lightly. "What with Harry's fame, we wouldn't want just anyone coming to ask him questions..."

Madam Snow's frown increased, but she pulled out a small card and held it in front of Dumbledore's eyes. Dumbledore spent quite a few moments adjusting his glasses and leaning forward in order to see it properly. "Ahhh," he said, tapping it. "Madame Christina Snow, from the Daily Prophet. Excellent."

With a slight sniff, Madam Snow returned her card to her pocket. Harry held his sleeve over his mouth to hide his grin. Dumbledore caught his eye, smiling slightly.

With a flick of his wand, Dumbledore summoned up two chairs. "Sit, sit!" he said. "Feel free to use my desk."

Madame Snow sniffed again and put a piece of parchment on Dumbledore's desk. Harry watched suspiciously as a quill hovered above it, reminding him of the one Rita Skeeter had used in their fourth-year.

"Now," Madam Snow said, smiling largely. "Harry... I'll just ask you some questions... and you answer them best you can."

"Um. Okay," he said nervously, watching as her quill danced across the parchment. He strained closer to see what it was saying.

Harry Potter: In Love

An official interview conducted by Christina H. Snow of the Daily Prophet

"How old are you?" she asked in a clipped tone.

"Sixteen."

"Year?"

"Sixth..." Harry trailed off. "Don't you already know that?"

She smiled sweetly. "Just making sure I have my facts straight."

Harry craned his neck to see what she was writing, stomach dropping as he did so.

Harry Potter, only in his sixth-year at Hogwarts, seems convinced that he and his girlfriend are meant to be. Disturbing as this is for a 16-year old...

Harry stopped reading. "No," he said quietly. "That's not what I said."

Madam Snow looked at the parchment, slightly disinterested. "Oh?"

"Yeah. I never said anything like that."

Dumbledore leaned forward in interest, taking the parchment and reading it quietly. Madam Snow sent him a heated look. "Harry is quite right," Dumbledore said quietly. "As a journalist, I'm sure that you appreciate integrity and fact finding in the search for truth."

Madam Snow glared at him. "Fine," she snapped, taking out another roll of parchment. Her eyes flashed back to Harry. "We'll start again, shall we?"

Harry nodded. "Okay."

"So, tell me Harry, these rumors about you having a girlfriend." Her gaze shifted to Dumbledore. "Are they true?"

Harry squirmed uncomfortably. "Yeah, it's true."

"Muggle-born Hermione Granger?"

Harry shifted again. "Yeah, but she's loads brighter than most wizards. She can do almost any spell."

"Hmmm..." Madam Snow said in interest, her quill flying madly over the page. Harry craned his neck to read it, but she pulled it closer to her body, hiding it.

Harry gulped.

She peered at him shrewdly, considering. "You in love with her, Harry?"

Harry felt all the colour drain from his face. He was suddenly afraid that he might slip out of his chair. "Wh... what?"

"It's a simple question. Do you love her?"

Harry's heart thundered in his ears. Did he what? WHAT? He slipped slightly, his palms feeling very sweaty. "I don't... I don't... I can't... what?"

Madam Snow hummed again, her quill scribbling with more persistence.

Feeling a dull roaring in his ears, Harry snatched up her parchment.

Harry Potter's eyes brightened at the thought of his new girlfriend, Miss Hermione Granger. He seems oblivious of the fact that she is Muggle born, as his eyes burst with pride over her talents as a witch. "She's loads brighter than other wizards," he says, his eyes shining brightly. "She can do anything..."

It's touching to see him so... in love. However, when asked just where his feelings lie for his new girlfriend, Harry Potter seems confused, dazed almost. "Wh... what?" he responds when asked if he loves her. Perhaps things aren't as clear as they seem. Harry said it himself, Hermione Granger is a very bright wizard. Top of her class at Hogwarts. Could it be possible... could she have put a spell on him? She certainly seems smart enough...

Harry paled. "NO! NO! NO!" he shouted. "This isn't RIGHT!"

Dumbledore leaned forward. "Perhaps," he said mildly. "It would be best to leave the question of love out of it for the time being."

Madam Snow glared at him, and snatched her parchment out of Harry's hands. "Very well." Trying to control her voice she said, "This your first relationship Harry?"

Harry felt his insides tighten up. What the bleeding hell did that have to do with anything? "Erm... not really," he stammered, thinking about his complete failure with Cho the year before.

Harry was privy to one of the few times Dumbledore looked surprise. Madam Snow caught his look as well and smiled in a superior fashion.

"Perhaps the Headmaster isn't as up to date on his students as he thinks..."

"Hardly," Dumbledore answered, leaning back. "Personal lives are none of my business."

Harry could still see, though, that he looked mildly unsettled.

"And how did that relationship end, Harry?" Madam Snow asked, leaning forward. "Badly? Did Hermione Granger get in the middle?"

"No, of course not," Harry answered crossly. "Things just didn't... work out."

Madam Snow frowned slightly at the news. Harry glanced worriedly at her quill, noticing that it was still scribbling madly. He had a very bad feeling that it was writing a story about how Hermione had stolen him from Cho's clutches the year before.

Harry glared at her, realizing that his plan to make the wizarding world see Hermione in a positive light was failing miserably.

He stood up, snatched the parchment off the table, and ripped it up into three long pieces before handing it to Dumbledore. Madam Snow watched him, eyes furious.

"What do you think you're doing?" she snapped.

"Getting rid of this rubbish!" Harry yelled. "You want your article? Fine. But we're doing things my way. There won't be anything in there about Hermione has cursed me or poisoned me or put me under a spell. You will put down exactly what I tell you to put down. Nothing more, nothing less."

Madam Snow looked both disappointed and furious. "Well, I'd hardly say you were the expert at knowing what sells papers."

"I DON'T CARE ABOUT SELLING PAPERS!" Harry yelled. "I JUST WANT TO HELP HERMIONE!"

At that, Madam Snow's quill began scribbling furiously again. Harry watched it, eyes bulging slightly. "Stop, stop, stop!" He snatched that piece of parchment, too, not even bothering to rip it up before handing it over to Dumbledore.

Madam Snow considered him. "Fine. What is your way, then?"

"I will tell you what I want you to write," Harry said calmly. "Then, only then, will you write it. You will write your entire piece before leaving this room. Dumbledore will read it before you leave. If what appears in tomorrow's paper has even the slightest deviation from that finished product, and I mean one comma or one period is out of place, I'm cutting the Prophet off. You will never, ever write another word about me again, and certainly never get another interview with me."

Madam Snow's eyes narrowed coolly. "Well, then, Potter, what will I be writing about?"

Harry took a breath, suddenly not sure what exactly he wanted to tell Madam Snow. He looked helplessly at Dumbledore, but Dumbledore appeared quite concentrated on his desk and didn't meet his eye. Harry sighed.

"Hermione was attacked because of me." Harry swallowed. "If she hadn't been going out with me... she would be fine right now. She was the best thing to ever happen to me. And she did not have to use a charm, curse, or a potion to get me to like her. I like her because of who she is and how she treats me. There is nothing fake about it. If someone ever attacks her again because they believe she's cursed me... I will hunt them down. I will make them pay... I will make their families pay... and I'll make their families pay and...."

Dumbledore coughed lightly.

Harry blinked. "Erm, never mind. I'll just be... really angry about it because Hermione's the last person that deserves that kind of hate."

Madam Snow was practically salivating. "Anything else you can give me, Potter? You ever have unrequited feelings for her? How long have you known you liked her?"

Harry just stared at her. "That's it. I'm not saying anything else. My relationship with Hermione is private. And it will stay that way."

"But... but... you've given me nothing! I can't write a story on a short paragraph like that!"

Harry shrugged. "You're a good writer. You'll find a way."

She glared at him, but, Harry noticed, her quill began scribbling over the parchment. He continued to watch her until she finished. Glaring at him in intense dislike, she held out her final product to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore hummed in interest, taking it and leaning back in his chair. He cleared his throat.

"Harry Potter's eyes are lined with bags. It is clear that he has not slept well in weeks. He is exhausted, the slight task of sitting straight too difficult to perform. Still, his eyes light up slightly when he is asked about his new girlfriend, Hermione Granger. As he talks, the reasons for his exhaustion become painfully obvious. She has been in the hospital wing now for over 10 days and it is clearly putting a strain on young, Harry's already heavy load."

Harry snorted. "What a load of crap!" he cried. "People actually read this? Do you have any idea what people are going to be saying? Ron's going to be bad enough... Malfoy'll probably be having a field day."

Madam Snow hefted her nose in the air. "This is brilliant. You want people to stop attacking your precious Hermione?" She nodded towards her article. "Women are going to weep when they read this..."

Harry felt sick.

Dumbledore continued.

"Harry Potter can barely screw up the courage to speak his next words. His eyes fill with tears and remorse as he says, "Hermione

was attacked because of me." The news is a shock, but his next words offer a grim explanation. "If she hadn't been going out with me... she would be fine right now." And therein lies the truth. Harry is deservedly famous, and viscous rumors about the nature of his relationship with Hermione led to her attack.

"She was the best thing to ever happen to me, and she did not have to use a charm, curse, or a potion to get me to like her. I like her because of who she is and how she treats me. There is nothing fake about it," Harry says, staring dreamily off into space.

When reminded of how the Wizarding Community reacted to the first news of his newfound relationship, he scowls, clearly personally insulted. "If ever Hermione is attacked again, on my behalf, I will be furious. Hermione is the last person that deserves that kind of hate." Harry smiles as he ends his interview, determined to keep the rest of their relationship private.

One thing is clear, it seems like the Real Thing has found Harry Potter. While us single (and not so single) ladies may shed a few tears over it, his devotion to Hermione is certainly a beautiful thing to behold."

Dumbledore set the parchment down, and peered down his nose at Madam Snow. "Good," he said, handing it back to her.

"What?" Harry exploded. "Good? Are you mad? I didn't... my eyes never filled with tears!"

Madam Snow eagerly snatched up her article. "Great job, Harry. I look foreword to interviewing you again. Hermione is one lucky girl. I'll just be bringing this in now..." Without so much as a backward glance, Madam Snow took off.

"Wait a minute!" Harry sputtered, shooting Dumbledore a betrayed glance. "She CAN'T print that!"

"Aww, well..." Dumbledore said with a slight smile. "Appears like that may happen."

Harry stared open-mouthed at him. "Professor, I can't believe that you would let her..."

Dumbledore held up a hand. "Harry, what is more important to you, your reputation, or Hermione's safety?"

Harry stared at him glumly, knowing he was fighting a losing battle. "Hermione's safety," he finally muttered.

Dumbledore nodded. "This will ensure it."

"But... but... it's NOT TRUE!"

"She quoted you accurately."

Harry's forehead banged on the desk. "Just kill me now... shoot me... stuff me... mount me..."

Dumbledore chuckled faintly as he stood up. "I'll walk you back to the hospital wing, Harry."

Harry got up slowly. "I'll be a complete and utter laughingstock... I won't ever be able to look Ron in the eye again... my team will stop listening to me at practice... Hermione'll break up with me when she reads it..."

"Oh, I doubt that very much."

Harry followed Dumbledore through the halls, trying very hard not to look anyone straight in the eye. He was pretty sure that people would suddenly know what had just happened. Outside the hospital wing, Dumbledore stopped and turned back to stare at Harry thoughtfully.

"Do you mind me asking, Harry, who you were involved with last year?"

Harry felt his cheeks colouring. "Oh, that. No... it was Cho. Cho Chang. She's in, uh, Ravenclaw..."

"I'm aware of who Cho is, Harry."

Harry nodded, blushing again. "Yeah. That would make sense."

"I never knew at the time," Dumbledore said, studying him.

"Well, Professor, don't take this personally, but you and I weren't exactly seeing a whole lot of each other last year." Harry shrugged. "Besides, nothing ever really happened. I kind of blew it."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," Harry said with a grin. "She was jealous of Hermione. Can you imagine?"

Harry entered Hermione's room with slight trepidation. Three days she'd been awake. Three days he'd spent holding her, talking to her, going over assignments with her. Three days since she'd been in the foulest, most cross mood she'd been in since the day they'd met. She was okay when Harry was kissing her—that at least prevented her from talking, but the rest of the time.... Ron had shared quietly that she was in a mood that rivaled Harry's own from two summers ago. Harry hadn't found the comment comforting.

And today was no exception.

"Hermione... this potion's all messed up... it's not supposed to be green. You must have told me something wrong."

"You obviously didn't follow my directions, Ron. It's two cups of gill weed and one cup salamander eyes."

"I can count, you know!"

"Well, it says here that the potion is very delicate, even the slightest error in measurement can lead to the destruction of..."

"I told you, I didn't mess it up!"

"Well, how else do you explain the green colour?"

"You told me something wrong!"

"Hey guys!" Harry greeted cheerfully.

Hermione's eyes narrowed at the sight of him. "Where have you been?"

Harry shrugged, not yet willing to share the news of the interview. She held out a hand for him, and he went to her, sitting down on the bed next to her. "How are you feeling?"

"Same as ever," she said crossly. "Absolutely fine. Madam Pomfrey still won't let me leave."

"I think she's right, we don't know what kind of lasting side effects you could be having."

"Oh, Harry," she replied, annoyed. "Give it a rest. I'm perfectly fine. I don't know how much longer I can stay in here—it'll drive me insane."

"You're just afraid of falling behind!" Ron piped up, from behind his cauldron.

"Well, with you helping me, I am falling behind!"

Certain of another impending argument, Harry placed a comforting hand on her arm. "Okay," he said softly. "Let's get you out of here."

Hermione's eyes widened slightly. "Wh... what?" she stuttered.

"Let's get you out of here," he said again. "I, honestly, don't know how much more of this I can take. Clearly this hospital room is making you grumpy. Or you're in a constant state of PMS... I haven't figured it out yet."

Hermione stared at him. "PMS?" she demanded, her voice shrill

Harry, who'd only said it as a joke, looked at her a little more fearfully. "Well, it seemed err... funny..."

To his surprise, Hermione started laughing. She leaned her head on his shoulder. "It is kind of funny..."

Now she was having mood swings. Harry looked at Ron, amused, but his red-haired friend seemed to be trying to look anywhere but at them. Harry rubbed Hermione's back absentmindedly. "I mean it, Hermione. Let's get out of here."

Hermione blinked. "But... but... Madam Pomfrey..."

"Will be hopping mad at me when she finds out," Harry replied with a grin. "Let's write her a note and leave it on your pillow. That should give her a small heart attack."

Ron looked up, suddenly interested. "Wicked! Can I write it?"

Harry nodded. "C'mon, Hermione. We have to do it now. Classes are just about to be out for the day. Can you walk?"

"I think so..." she said uncertainly. Harry seized one of her arms, helping her to her feet. She rocked a little, letting out a small. "Oh!" Harry winced as she gripped one of his arms. "Okay, I can do this."

Yelping suddenly in pain, Hermione grasped at her stomach. Harry watched her with wide eyes. "Oh no!" he moaned. "It is PMS..."

Hermione tottered dangerously on her feet, and Harry wrapped an arm around her waist to keep her up. She leaned against him, breathing heavily. "Don't be daft, Harry," she replied, out of breath. "This is where she hit me with..."

"Oh," Harry answered quickly, feeling stupid. "If you're in pain maybe we shouldn't..."

"No," she said, resolutely. "I need to get out of here."

Ron finished the note and left it on the pillow. He grasped Hermione's other elbow and the two boys helped her along.

"I don't need your help!" she yelled.

"Okay," Harry responded, not letting go of her.

"I'm fine!"

"Okay," he said again, hoping very hard that she wouldn't curse him or something.

Breathing hard, the three managed to make it to the Gryffindor staircase without being seen. Ron looked around fearfully, letting go of Hermione as he did so. She tottered dangerously, leaning her full weight on Harry. Harry winced but held on.

"Ron!" Harry hissed.

Ron's eyes were widening. "Oh, I don't like this... I don't like this at all..."

"Neither," Harry gasped, as Hermione ushered him along. "Do I... help me out, will you?"

Ron continued to look around fearfully. "Peeves!" he whispered frantically. "I can hear him coming!"

Harry's eyes widened. "Go distract him or something, then!"

"Er, right.... How?"

"Ron, you're a bright wizard, FIGURE IT OUT!" Hermione yelled, her voice taking on a frustrated strain.

"I dunno, Ron," Harry said, slightly more gently. "Tell him Umbridge is back or something."

"Ooohhh... that's good... that's really good..."

Ron hurried off, and Hermione's grip on Harry's arm tightened painfully. "Don't just stand there!" she wailed, "We have to get out of here!"

Harry grit his teeth, practically carrying her up each step. "You..." he said between breaths, beginning to sweat slightly. "Have... to... help... me... out..."

"Famous Quidditch player like you," she responded nastily. "I would have thought you could take it."

Harry decided to concentrate on moving, talking was too difficult. Unfortunately, Hermione had no such compunction.

"Hurry up!" she moaned. "We'll never make it... then I'll be in trouble... and I'm already far enough behind..."

"Hermione. Shut. Up."

"Harry, you know, you've been nothing but nasty to me since we started going out. I don't really appreciate it. It certainly does not give you a right to..."

Harry tuned her out, too exhausted to get properly worked up over it. At long last he reached the Gryffindor common room, gasping, sweating, and needing a desperate breath of clean air. He deposited her in the nearest possible chair before falling to the floor. He rolled over on to his back, staring up at the ceiling and concentrating on his breathing.

Hermione sniffed lightly. "Ewww... you're all sweaty...."

Oh, bloody hell.

Harry decided he couldn't take it anymore. Climbing up on his hands and knees, he crawled towards her, a dark look glinting in his eyes.

She knew immediately what he was doing. "No! No way!" she said, holding out a hand to stop him. "You're all disgusting and... and...."

"And what?" he asked softly, getting up.

"Well... you... you..." Apparently not quite sure what he was, Hermione trailed off and glared at him instead.

Harry sent her a disarming grin. "C'mon," he needed. "You think I'm attractive when I'm sweaty..."

"I most certainly do not!"

He reached her chair and continued to grin down at her. "You do... you think I'm attractive..."

"I don't!" she yelped.

"Well, I think you're attractive. Even when you're grumpy, mean and spiteful."

"I am NOT spiteful!" she paused to think about it. "OR GRUMPY!"

"You just keep getting cuter..."

"Shut your mouth, Potter."

"Make me."

"FINE!"

Then he was kissing her, and thank God, because that meant she couldn't talk. And kissing Hermione could never be bad because it was Hermione, and, Oh Merlin, did she just slip her tongue into his mouth? Despite her earlier protests, she pulled him closer, and he fell on her, balancing precariously on the armchair. Her tongue was most definitely tracing his own and he felt slightly dizzy, hyper aware of her hands traveling down his back.

She moaned slightly, making Harry feel slightly superior. "You... are... one hell... of a kisser..." she whispered breathlessly against his mouth.

Harry, feeling like any kind of thought at this point would be completely useless, was inclined to disagree--she was an excellent kisser. She shifted underneath him, and it drove him crazy, so he deepened the kiss, pressing himself tighter against her until he could feel every part of her pressing against him.

He was suddenly swamped with a feeling so powerful that he nearly fell right out of the chair. His eyes flew open and he pulled sharply away from her. He stared at her in incomprehension, wondering why it had taken him so damn long to realize. Because this wasn't a new feeling... he'd felt this way for a long time... even if he couldn't pinpoint exactly when it started.

She stared at him, her eyes meeting his. "Harry..." she whispered. "What is it?"

"Hermione," he gulped. "I lo—"

The door to the common room opened and slammed and Hermione yelped, pushing him off her. He landed in a heap on the floor, slightly dazed, and feeling very empty. He looked up to find Ron glowering down at him.

Harry swallowed, sitting up. "Hey Ron..." he said hesitantly. "How's Peeves?"

Ron's eyes ticked from him, to Hermione sitting breathlessly in the armchair, and back to Harry again. "I'm not stupid, you know."

Harry blinked innocently. "Oh? I never thought that you were..."

"You have lipstick on your mouth," he said bluntly.

Harry felt his face heating up. "Ron, don't get upset over this or anything, but... Hermione and I do kiss on occasion... it's sort of part of why we're together in the first place..."

Ron turned on his heel and stalked out of the room. Harry watched him go helplessly.

Hermione frowned. "Oh, that was nice and subtle, Harry."

Harry banged his head wearily against the floor. "At least," he mumbled, against it. "Things can't get any worse." There was a moment of silence when Harry truly let himself believe that he was right.

Hermione stomped painfully on his hand, and said in a hushed voice. "They just did."

Harry rolled over and froze at the sound of Professor McGonagall's angry voice. "Potter, what do you think you're doing?"

Harry's eyes widened and he wiped his mouth with his sleeve, praying that the lipstick marks would go away. Since when had Hermione started wearing lipstick, anyway?

"Professor," he stuttered. "Erm... there is a very good explanation for this...erm... let's see..."

Hermione was glaring at him. Harry couldn't really blame her. "Professor," she said in her cool, calm voice. "This isn't Harry's fault. I was going crazy down in the hospital wing... and I persuaded him and Ron to help me up here. One more minute lying in that bed and I think I would have killed someone. Harry can tell you, I wasn't in a very good mood."

McGonagall fixed her piercing stare on Harry. "Well, she wasn't..." he said nervously. "And I didn't think it was very good for her to be shut up in there and she said she was fine, so with a little help we managed to get her up here..."

Hermione nodded eagerly. "I feel much better now."

Professor McGonagall's mouth drew into a tight line. "I can see that."

Harry flushed. Hermione, on the other hand, didn't so much as blink.

"Please don't make me go back down there, Professor," she begged. "I know we shouldn't have, but I was sort of hoping that if I managed to get all the way up here you would be more apt to let me stay."

"We have no way of preventing another attack. The spell put on your room in the hospital was very complicated and nearly impossible to replicate..."

"Not a problem," Harry answered quickly. "After tomorrow, I think Hermione'll be okay."

Hermione and McGonagall both shot him piercing looks. Harry squirmed uncomfortably. "Oh?" Professor McGonagall said icily. "And just how do you plan on protecting her until then?"

"Well... I'll stay with her at all times. Library, Great Hall, wherever..."

"Harry, I don't need a shadow!" Hermione protested angrily. "I'm more than capable of taking care of myself!"

"And when she goes up to her dorm room, Potter?" McGonagall snapped. "Surely you don't plan on following her there, do you?"

"Is that an invitation?" Harry asked, trying to sound innocent. "Professor?" he added, quickly.

Hermione gasped. "Harry!"

To Harry's intense relief, Professor McGonagall actually smiled. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that, Potter." She considered him with narrowed eyes. "Fine, I'll trust that you'll bring Miss Granger back to the infirmary at the slightest indication that she is not feeling well."

Harry nodded, hardly daring or believing his luck. When Professor McGonagall left, he was still staring somewhat blankly at the spot she had just vacated. Hermione smacked him lightly in the back of the head, and he turned around scowling.

"What?"

She frowned at him. "That was a stupid comment that you made."

Harry sighed, feeling slightly hurt. "I know."

She continued to watch him with an accusatory glare. "You are not coming up to my dorm room."

"I wouldn't dream of it, okay? Plus, I can't. Boys aren't allowed in the girls' dorms."

Harry wished that she would start being a little bit nicer, because having Hermione in a bad mood was exhausting work. He was already tired enough, as he hadn't slept properly in almost two weeks. He stretched out on the floor of the common room, yawning largely. He closed his eyes, his eyelids feeling heavy.

Harry heard Hermione moving around, but he didn't want to look at her because he was afraid she would start yelling at him again. He gave a start of surprise when he felt her arm on his elbow. He opened

his eyes to find her staring down at him, looking sad. He licked his lips, his mouth suddenly very dry.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Harry stared at her stupidly, suddenly having a hard time remembering what she was apologizing for. "You're... what?"

Hermione's eyes welled with tears. "I've been so... mean and horrible the last few days!" she wailed. "You've been so patient and understanding... and oh, Harry... I'm sorry!"

"Oh, well..." Harry said awkwardly, hating it when she cried. "I mean... I've been in worse moods." Hermione's eyes glistened and Harry reached for her hand. "Really, it's fine. I don't mind. I'm just glad that you're here to be mean to me."

Hermione sniffled. "That was so sweet."

Harry's head started pounding. He hadn't been trying to be "sweet," he'd honestly only been telling the truth. Girls... it was like they made stuff up when there wasn't anything to make up. It made him even more tired.

Hermione leaned down and kissed him hesitantly. Harry tugged her down on top of him, his hands running down her back. Having her surround him so completely made him dizzy, and the same feeling that he'd felt before returned. He felt warmed throughout his body, until his hands and feet tingled. When she pulled away, her face remained hovered inches from his, her brown eyes staring deeply into his.

Harry swallowed.

In a whisper, Hermione said, "What... what were you going to tell me before?"

'She knew,' Harry thought, her eyes boring into his. She knew and it scared her and she was only beginning to gather herself together again. He could still feel the soft brush of her lips against his own and

the same feeling that he felt before welled up inside him. She was his equal in every way, the only one that understood him, the only one that could boss him around, the only one that knew how to calm him down, the only one that would tell him when he was acting like an idiot. And Harry knew. Harry knew because he had never been surer of anything before in his life.

He loved her. She was his weakness. The one thing that he couldn't lose.

Harry felt sick as the realization dawned on him. He remembered, with terrifying detail, the night in the Department of Mysteries when Dolohov had cursed her. His panic, his inability to think straight, he'd lost it completely. It was Neville who had the common sense enough to check for a pulse.

Harry felt a fear unlike what he'd ever felt before. Terrible things happened to people he loved. Hermione held the most important place in his life. His best friend, his most trusted confidant, his unending support, his brain and heart all at the same time. She'd stay unerringly by his side, no matter what came after him. She'd be beside him during his final fight with Voldemort...

His scar prickled painfully and Harry felt icy cold panic fill his stomach. 'Voldemort knows...'

Hermione was still staring at him, clearly waiting for an answer. He couldn't look at her. Guilt and fear battled it out in his stomach. With a groan, Harry gathered her up against him. "It's nothing," he said quietly, stroking her hair. "It doesn't matter."

She shivered slightly. "What's wrong?"

Harry felt a lump gather in his throat and he held her a little more desperately. "Nothing is wrong. I'm just glad that you're out of the hospital wing."

Hermione nodded and he knew that she knew he was lying. She didn't press him though, seeming to sense his desperation. "I'll always be here for you, Harry."

Harry closed his eyes, the pain on his forehead increasing. He could swear he heard a chilling laugh.

He loved her. She was the one thing he couldn't live without. And he'd have to give her up because loving Hermione put her in terrible danger.

It was the nightmare that drove the point home.

It was his first night back in his dorm room since Hermione had first been attacked and he'd fallen dead asleep the second he hit the pillow. The nightmare started like most of the other ones. Harry watched, in slow motion, as Sirius teetered on the brink of the Veil. He reached out to save him, because he could, because he was close enough, because one more step and Sirius would be safe and they would all go back to Grimmauld place and have a good laugh over it. Then Voldemort cackled, showing Harry that it had all been an illusion, that Sirius was already dead...

Dumbledore was explaining the prophecy to him. It was Harry's destiny to kill Voldemort, or be killed by him. Harry tried to explain that he couldn't kill anyone, that he didn't have that kind of power or darkness in him. Dumbledore remained unflinching, even though Harry was sure that he was mistaken.

He was by the Veil again, Sirius was toppling towards it and Harry knew that this time, he would stop him, that this time he could save him. His eyes widened when he saw that it wasn't Sirius after all, but Hermione. She was reaching out for him, and he felt his heart pounding because he knew that no matter what... he had to save her. Nothing else mattered.

Dumbledore was telling him that he mustn't because it was a trap, that Voldemort was his real goal. Harry didn't care because it was Hermione, and he couldn't lose Hermione. Harry tried to explain to Dumbledore that it was different this time, he was prepared, he knew what was going to happen, he could stop it.

Only, when he turned to reach out and save her, she was gone. Harry heard a cold laugh inside his head, and he broke out into a chilled sweat. Voldemort had Hermione. Dumbledore was trying to make him understand that Voldemort was using Hermione to get to him. Harry didn't care. It only mattered that he could save her. His head was throbbing so hard that he was afraid that it would burst apart. He begged Dumbledore for help, worried that Voldemort had already killed. Dumbledore said he hadn't, but he was using the cruciatus

curse. Harry panicked because he knew what that was like and Hermione didn't deserve it and....

Harry gasped awake, clutching his forehead and moaning. The complete stillness of the dorm room rushed up to meet him. He glanced around, still clutching his aching head, and feeling a coldness sweep over him. He could feel the sweat trickling down his back and it made him shiver. He lay back down in bed, closing his eyes and breathing heavily.

It had just been a dream. But Harry knew... a dream like that... it was only a time before it came true.

Harry waited until she was better.

He had a vague hope that his Daily Prophet article would do the job for him, but that failed miserably. Much like Madam Snow had predicted, it seemed to make women everywhere just that much more insane. Professor Trewlaney got all weepy and told him he'd have a long and prosperous life. Professor McGonagall actually smiled at him warmly before beginning her daily lesson. Even Hermione, who Harry had generally thought of as level-headed, completely lost it when she read the article. She cried and kissed him and got tearful repeatedly throughout the day every time she saw him.

It was mortifying.

Ron stopped speaking to him, Neville stopped looking at him, and Malfoy was reading clips from it in the middle of the halls. Snape had taken to berating him even more.

Despite the embarrassment, Harry felt a nervous kind of fluttering in his stomach every time he thought about the article. He knew what he had to do, now, and the article felt like some kind of a sham in the wake of it all. But he found he could deal with that. Ron would get over it, Malfoy would grow tired of reading the article, and Snape had always been cruel to him. Hermione was another thing. It tortured him to be near her.

What was worse, it didn't take her long to figure out that there was something wrong. She shot him worried looks in class and asked him repeatedly about what was bothering him. Harry could barely look at her. Every time he did he could feel how much he loved her welling up inside him. So he stopped touching her and barely spoke to her. He only did enough to keep up appearances, something that was hurting both of them tremendously.

The nightmares kept happening. He began dreading going to bed every night. As soon as he closed his eyes, he could feel the tendrils of nightmares drawing him in. Sweating profusely, scar throbbing, he'd wake up, Hermione's name on his lips. He heard the laugh again, in the far back of his mind, and that chilled him more than the remnants of the nightmare. Despite Occlumency, Voldemort was getting in. Harry was more sure now than ever before, Voldemort knew. Voldemort knew what Hermione meant to him, and Harry was terrified about the power that gave him.

Two weeks after Hermione left the hospital wing, Harry knew that it was time. She was as healthy as ever, completely caught up in classes, and had even been asking for extra work. Harry noticed that she'd been spending much of her time in the library, and he realized that it was because it was becoming harder for her to be around him. Ron had grudgingly begun talking to him again that morning, something that, Harry realized, would help things somewhat.

He was sitting with Hermione in the common room by the fire. He hadn't quite been able to help himself and he held her tightly against him, playing with her hair and concentrating on how she felt in his arms. She leaned back against him, reading a book, and Harry allowed himself the simple pleasure of how comfortable and relaxing the position felt. He closed his eyes, holding her tighter, feeling an empty feeling work its way into the pit of his stomach. This was the last time he'd ever get a chance to hold her like this.

Hermione shut her book with a snap, tilting her head back. "Harry..." she whispered, slowly. "Can I ask you something?"

He kept his eyes closed and felt slightly sick to his stomach. "Of course," he said with difficulty, sure that he knew what her question would be about.

Hermione swallowed before saying in a tearful voice, "Why won't you kiss me anymore?"

Her hurt was radiating off her in waves. Harry ached for her, for himself. Nothing about this was fair. With great reluctance, he released her, saying a mental good-bye as he did so. He stood, holding a hand out. He wasn't quite ready to let go completely.

"Let's go for a walk," he said, his voice shaking.

Hermione's eyes met his and filled with tears. She nodded, and accepted his hand. He led her outside, by the lake and they walked along, hands joined, a heavy silence between them. Harry watched a mother duck swim by, her ducklings trailing in a long line behind her. The image caused a lump to form in his throat.

Hermione glanced down at their joined hands. "You're breaking up with me, aren't you?"

Harry let go of her, the loss of contact one more painful blow. He turned away so that she couldn't see the tears that gathered in his eyes. He watched the lake. He wanted so desperately to lie to her, to tell her that everything was fine and he'd just been distracted recently and that he loved her... and...

"Yes," he whispered.

He heard a sob and he knew he couldn't turn around because the sight of her hurting (because of him) would make him take it all back. She sobbed again, and Harry gritted his teeth, staring at the lake, feeling his own tears graze against his cheeks.

"Why?" she gasped out, behind him. "I thought that you... Oh... I must have been so wrong..."

"You weren't wrong," Harry said hoarsely. "You weren't wrong." He turned around because she was in pain and he couldn't ignore it. She was on the ground, clutching her knees to her chest.

She looked up at him, eyes shining. "I don't understand..."

Harry crouched down next to her, resisting the urge to reach out. "Yes, you do." He tried to smile. "I love you, Hermione."

She stared at him for a second, her face registering complete shock. Finally, she shook her head empathetically. "No. No you don't," she said, her voice shaking. "No. Because if you did... you wouldn't do this to me..."

"It's because I love you that I'm doing this..." Harry said, but the explanation sounded ridiculous even to his own ears.

It only made Hermione cry harder. "You could at least be honest!" she managed, between sobs. "Don't you think you at least owe me that?"

"I am being honest," he said, between clenched teeth. "I'm so sorry Hermione. This is... this is the hardest thing I've ever done." His voice cracked and he stared down at his hands, speaking quickly. "I can't... I can't think straight when you're around. I couldn't function when you were in the hospital." Harry swallowed. "Ask Ron... he'll tell you. And last year, in the Department of Mysteries... when you were attacked... I couldn't think straight. I couldn't take your pulse, I couldn't defend you, I couldn't do anything. Even then..."

Hermione looked up at him, her cheeks pale in the moonlight. "Stop," she whispered. "Just... stop." She took a long, shaky breath. "Why are you doing this to me?"

The heartbreak in her voice nearly made Harry take all of it back. "Hermione," he whispered, throat raw. "I'm doing this to protect you."

She let out a hollow laugh. "Oh, that's rich. That's right. You're doing this to protect me. Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"It's true," he said softly. "Hermione, there is no one in my life who I care about more! Don't you understand how dangerous that is? Don't you understand what kind of position that puts you in? People I love die!"

She backed furiously away from him. "Don't you think I know that?" she yelled. "I'm not stupid, Harry!"

"Of course you're not stupid," Harry snapped. "This isn't about that—"

"Yes, it IS!" Hermione bellowed. "You don't think I'm smart enough to make my own decisions! You don't think I'm smart enough to know what I'm getting into! Don't you think it's a little bit late to be reading me the warning label? You kissed me!"

Harry felt himself growing desperate. "You don't understand," he said quietly. "It's... Voldemort is connected to me in ways I have no comprehension of. He knows, Hermione. He knows. And he'll use it... he'll use you... he'll use what I feel for you."

"Stop," she said again, burying her face in her hands. Her voice muffled, she continued. "You have no idea how much this hurts."

Harry looked away from her. He could feel her pain as if it were his own. And dealing with his own pain was difficult enough. "Please," he whispered. "Just... listen to what I have to say. I couldn't live with myself if I thought you hated me."

"I don't hate you," she said, her voice breaking. "I could never hate you."

Harry reached out, resting his hand on the top of her knee. She flinched and pulled away from him. The emptiness inside him increased. He spoke with more urgency. "Remember the prophecy, Hermione? The one that was destroyed?"

She peered up at him, her eyes red and swollen. Comprehension dawned in her eyes. "You know what it said."

Harry bowed his head and nodded. "It was only a replication. It was one of Trelawney's... the reason Dumbledore hired her. He... he told me what was in it last year."

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" she breathed, sounding worried.

Harry shrugged, still avoiding her eyes. "It's difficult, Hermione. I wanted so badly to believe that it wasn't true. Admitting it aloud... it would have made it real." Harry sighed and looked up, slightly encouraged by the sympathy he saw on her face. "It says that I was marked, that Voldemort and I are connected. We can't... we can't both be alive at the same time." Harry paused, the lump in his throat growing larger. "One of us has to kill the other."

She shifted closer to him, her obvious worry for him momentarily out-shadowing the pain that he caused her. It made Harry's heart ache. "Oh, Harry," she gasped, reaching blindly for his hand. "I'm so sorry."

Their hands met and Harry stared down at them, feeling tears threatening his vision. "The only thing Voldemort knows is that I have the power to destroy him. That's why he's spent so long trying to kill me."

"That's why he came after you when you were a baby," Hermione said softly. "That's why... that's why your parents are..." she stopped, her grip on his hand becoming painfully tight. "That wasn't your fault, Harry. You were a baby..."

"It doesn't matter," he said sharply. "It was still because of me. Say what you want, you know that's true."

Her breath was coming out in quick gasps. "I refuse to leave you alone. I refuse to just... abandon you to Voldemort. I refuse."

"Listen to me, Hermione," Harry said sharply. "I'd do anything to protect you. Remember how Voldemort used me when he found out about my link with Sirius? I can't let that happen again. You're the one thing I can't lose, Hermione. I won't give Voldemort that kind of power. Not again. Never again."

She was crying again. "But... if we know that..."

"No," Harry said firmly.

"Harry, you listen to me!" she said shrilly. She wiped at her tears, her face set into a stubborn glare. "I won't—I can't—let you fight Voldemort alone."

"I know!" he cried, feeling desperation claw up inside him. Why was she making this so difficult? Why didn't she understand? "When it comes to Voldemort, I'm ultimately alone. He's my fight, my responsibility, and he would do anything to destroy me. And I would do anything to protect you."

She wrenched her hand out of his grip and Harry felt it as a blow to his heart. He stared at her, feeling the heavy weight of their combined misery descending upon them.

"I'm not completely useless, you know!" she said, voice high-pitched. "I can protect myself!"

"But I would do anything to protect you, anyway," Harry said, feeling a calm resignation descend upon him. "How can we be together when the cost is your life, my life or the lives of others?"

Hermione looked stricken. Eyes wide and miserable she said, with horror, "We can't."

The words hit him like a hammer. For a moment he was afraid he couldn't breathe. "I'm so sorry. I wish..." he shook his head, feeling his chest constrict. "No, it doesn't matter what I wish. But I didn't want you to think... I didn't want to let you go without knowing how I felt about you."

Her eyes widened, tears spilling out of it. "Damn it," she whispered. "Damn it! How are we supposed to stay away from each other?"

Harry pressed his fists to his eyes. Watching her hurt him. "I don't know."

She stood up and let out a shaky breath. "This isn't fair... this isn't fair at all..."

"Hermione," he said, his voice cracking. "Maybe one day in the future... if I win..."

"Don't," she said sharply. "We can't think that far ahead. It'll only make things worse."

He nodded miserably. "You better go, then. I don't know how much longer I can take..."

She was already leaving.

Harry opened his eyes to watch her walk away from him. She was trembling from head to foot, but appeared to be holding herself together. He didn't know that anything could hurt as much as it did at that moment.

In the back of his mind he heard a low, sinister laugh...

Harry spent the entire weekend in bed.

He stared at the ceiling blankly when he was awake and spent most of his time dozing or sleeping heavily. He hid under his blankets, and didn't breathe so much as a word to anyone else.

Harry hadn't been aware that there was a pain like this. Everything hurt. He had trouble breathing, he had trouble thinking, and he had trouble remembering why he was at Hogwarts in the first place. The pain was consuming. He felt like someone had run a truck into him and then left him out on the hot pavement to die and be eaten by vultures.

The weekend past in a fit of uneasy dozing and periods of blankness where Harry's sole goal was to think as little as possible. Every time he did, he would see Hermione's face crumble as he broke both their hearts.

Late Sunday night, Ron hovered awkwardly over his bedside. "Harry... you haven't left this room all weekend, mate. Can't be healthy..."

Harry ignored him and hoped he'd go away. He could appreciate Ron's concern... but he was about the last person he wanted to share the news with.

Ron cleared his throat. "Did you and Hermione have... err, a fight?"

Harry curled tightly into a ball. "Go away," he said.

Ron sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. "She's spent the entire weekend in the library. She comes out to eat every once and a while, but she looks terrible. All splotchy and stuff, likes she's been crying a lot."

Harry didn't want to hear about what kind of pain Hermione was in. It only made him feel worse. "Go away, Ron," he repeated.

"Why don't the two of you, I dunno, just make up or something? Probably make both of you a whole lot more bearable to live with."

Harry desperately wished that Ron could have given him this much support only two weeks earlier. Harry sat up, feeling lightheaded and looked Ron in the eye. "We broke up," he said flatly.

Ron looked startled. "You broke up?"

Harry felt a fresh wave of pain and he hugged his knees to his chest. His throat was feeling scratchy so he only nodded.

"I can't bloody believe it," Ron muttered. "She break up with you?"

Harry shook his head.

Ron's eyes got even wider. "You're mad! Why would you do a thing like that for?"

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and let out a deep breath. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I thought that you were falling in love with her."

Harry was having trouble breathing. "Ron," he said desperately. "Please. I don't want to talk about it."

Ron stared at him, still looking rather surprised. "Okay, sure. Whatever you say."

"Ron, I need to ask you a favour."

Ron blinked at him. "Erm... okay..."

"It's... Hermione." Harry felt dizzy as he said her name. Saying it reminded him of how far away from him she was. "There's going to be... a lot of backlash. Just watch out for her, okay? I mean, she's more than capable of handling herself, but after what happened with Jane Noxon..."

"Yeah, of course." Ron thought about it for a moment before grinning. "Think she'll let me follow her into the bathroom?"

Harry doubted it and didn't, in all actuality, want to think about it. "Just make sure no one curses her with her back turned, okay?"

"Yeah, of course... I mean, I'd do that anyway."

Harry lay back down and rolled over, so he wouldn't have to look at Ron anymore. Ron would be able to see Hermione at breakfast the next morning. Ron would be able to ask her for homework. Ron wouldn't have to worry that Voldemort would try and destroy at him by destroying those he loved most...

Harry shut his eyes, trying to will his mind blank so that he could block out the pain. He felt the bed shift and knew Ron had left.

It was the worst weekend of Harry Potter's life.

Monday morning was the worst morning of Harry Potter's life. Harry wasn't sure if it was Ron who blabbed, but everyone knew by Monday morning that he and Hermione had split up.

Harry awoke to a vicious headache, a dry throat, and hunger pains in his stomach. He was trembling when he dressed. He didn't want to go down to the Great Hall for breakfast because he knew Hermione would be there and he wouldn't be able to sit next to her, or kiss her good-morning, or steal her coffee, or read her paper...

He went down with Seamus and Dean, his legs feeling shaky and rubbery. They kept shooting him odd glances, as if they wanted to say something but didn't really know what. When he stumbled down the last few stairs, they took a step back, looking at him like he'd become something they didn't understand.

"You all right there, Harry?" Seamus asked, sounding like he hoped Harry wouldn't answer him.

Harry clutched his books tightly and nodded, going on ahead of them

He heard Dean whispering in slight worry behind him. "A girl is having this much effect on him... a girl."

"It's so sad..." Seamus added.

"I never want a girlfriend, if this is what happens to you..."

"Harry's really quite pathetic, isn't he?"

"Never thought I'd see the day when the Boy Who Lived would get his heart ripped out by a girl..."

"Hermione no less..."

Harry stopped and turned around. "I can hear you!"

Dean and Seamus gave him patronizing looks as if dealing with a child. "Sure, Harry. Whatever you say."

Harry stared open-mouthed at them before continuing on to the Great Hall.

"See!" Dean said triumphantly from behind him. "He's cracking up..."

"Completely insane..."

"I CAN STILL HEAR YOU!" Harry hollered.

"Now he's hearing things!" Dean said frantically.

"He's too far gone!"

Harry gave up. He stomped into the Great Hall, feeling lightheaded and nervous. He stopped suddenly in the entrance, barely twitching when Seamus and Dean crashed into him.

Hermione was sitting at the far end and her eyes met his from across the room. Harry felt dizzy and only started moving again when Seamus jabbed him in the back and pushed him forward.

"Really, Harry, have you ever considered professional help?" he asked.

Harry ignored him, still staring avidly at Hermione. She looked pale and was clutching her coffee mug rather tightly. He was somewhat reassured (though also quite jealous) to see Ron at her elbow, furiously copying down what appeared to be her homework.

Harry fell into a seat next to Dean, still watching Hermione and Ron carefully. Dean followed his gaze and shook his head sadly.

"Ahhh... the day the famous trio split up..."

"It's okay, Harry," Seamus said. "You can form another trio with us. We'll let you be our leader and everything."

Harry helped himself to a rather large plate of food, eating it mechanically while he watched Hermione. "Uh huh," he said, not having heard a word.

Dean and Seamus looked at each other worriedly. "This is so pathetic," Seamus muttered.

"Really, Harry. Go on the rebound. Go nuts. Have a one-night stand with someone. I bet you loads of girls would be up for it. Then you can dump them the next day and break their hearts into a thousand shards."

"Uh huh," Harry answered again.

Harry was nearly certain that Hermione was watching him back. Of course, she was being a little bit subtler about it. She glanced in his direction every once in a while before hurriedly shifting her eyes back down to her plate, the newspaper, or Ron. Harry just stared at her openly, not quite able to help himself.

"So, a one night-stand, then," Seamus was saying. "Okay. So someone hot, preferably low on the brains."

"Long, straight hair," Dean continued. "Blue eyes?"

"Sure," Harry answered absently. "Whatever you come up with will be great."

Dean and Seamus looked at each other again.

"Hey, Harry," said Dean. "I'm thinking about walking into the Forbidden Forest without my wand. I think I'll bring Neville with me for protection... and I'm planning on yelling really loudly."

"Have fun," Harry said, a bit dazed.

"Let me handle this one," said Seamus, winking at Dean. "Harry, I was just curious... now that you and Hermione have broken up... I'm sure that you wouldn't have any problems with her going out with Ron."

Harry's head snapped around so fast that he almost broke his neck. "WHAT?"

"Well, you know," Seamus said innocently. "They've always had U.R.S.T."

"What the hell is U.R.S.T.?"

"Unresolved Sexual Tension," Dean answered.

Harry nearly fell off the bench. "They do NOT!"

Seamus nodded and looked at Dean. "Am I right?"

"You are most certainly right."

Seamus turned back to Harry, looking smug. "Arguing... one of the most telltale signs of U.R.S.T.!"

"They do not have unresolved sexual tension!" Harry cried, sounding frantic. "They don't have sexual tension at all!"

"Oh, there they go again..." Dean said, nodding in their direction.

Harry whipped back around. Sure enough, Ron and Hermione were arguing. Ron appeared to be holding one of Hermione's books in the air above her head and she was jumping wildly for it. They could hear her shrieking from all the way across the room.

"Ron Weasley, you give me that book back RIGHT NOW! Or I WILL curse you within an inch of your life! AND THEN I WILL TAKE THAT INCH!"

"U.R.S.T." Seamus said calmly, eating a sausage and watching Harry eagerly for a reaction.

"Definite U.R.S.T." Dean added.

Harry watched as Ron, who seemed to take Hermione on her word, handed her the book back. As soon as she had possession of it, she began hitting him with it. Harry winced, noting that it was a hardcover book and looked rather large.

"Yep," Seamus said proudly. "Can feel the heat coming off those two in waves."

"That's like second base for them," Dean pointed out. "You and Hermione ever get to second base?"

Harry was certainly not going to be sharing that kind of information with Seamus and Dean. He scowled.

"They're just arguing. They're angry. It doesn't mean anything!"

Seamus snorted. "Sure, Harry. As long as you believe that."

Dean peered at Ron and Hermione curiously. They were both glaring ahead of them, sniping angrily at each other every few moments. "See... the thing with arguing is... it's the only way they know how to express themselves. It's a way of covering up for their real feelings, if you know what I mean."

"THEY DON'T HAVE ANY REAL FEELINGS!"

Heads from all over the hall turned in Harry's direction. He slumped down in his seat, trying hard not to look at anybody.

It didn't matter. He and Hermione weren't together anymore. She could have U.R.S.T. with whomever she wanted to have U.R.S.T. with and he didn't have any right to get upset about it. Even if it was Ron.

Eyes sad, he tried to smile and Seamus and Dean. "So... this one night stand..." he asked casually.

They looked delighted.

"Oh, we knew you would come out of it, Harry!" Seamus cried jubilantly.

"You've learned an important lesson," Dean said with uncharacteristic seriousness. "Girls are pretty. Girls are fun to look at. Most usually a girl is fun to snog. However, having feelings for a girl..."

Seamus shuddered. "Bad idea, mate."

Harry was quite inclined to agree with them.

Ron sat next to him in Transfiguration. Harry was grateful. He'd been worrying that Ron would pick sides, and the natural side for him to pick would be Hermione's. Instead, Ron surprised him by dumping his stuff down next to him and saying, "I highly doubt anyone would try and curse Hermione under McGonagall's nose. Mind if I sit here?"

Harry just stared at him. "Err... yeah, sure."

"You okay, Harry?" Ron asked, a little concerned. "You're awfully pale."

Harry just nodded. "Well, you know, I haven't eaten much in the last few days."

Ron snorted. "Or at all." He studied him curiously for a moment, as if trying to decide something. "Hermione's worried about you," Ron shared quietly.

Harry felt his stomach flutter. "She is?" he whispered.

Ron nodded and scowled slightly. "Bloody annoying, really. Gets all teary-eyed and everything every time someone so much as mentions your name."

Harry smiled slightly as McGonagall came into the room. "Thanks."

Ron just shrugged and pulled out his homework. Harry stared at it stupidly, suddenly realizing that he hadn't done his. In fact, he hadn't done any homework.

The hair on the back of his neck prickled and he looked up, only to find Hermione staring at him from across the room. She looked startled and quickly bent down over her notes. Harry stared at her a while longer, wondering if she was having as difficult a time with their separation as he was.

He began to notice that people in the class were nudging each other and pointing in his direction. Despite McGonagall's strict classroom, he began to hear bits and pieces of conversation.

"So it is true..."

"I knew all along... quite clear when they didn't sit together at breakfast..."

"See the way he's looking at her? Broken hearted, he is..."

"Maybe they're just fighting?"

"Naw... bit over the top for a fight..."

"I was so sure it was meant to be, after reading that interview..."

Harry felt sick. He glanced at Ron. Trying to appear as if he was taking notes (he hadn't heard a word McGonagall had said), he asked, out of the corner of his mouth, "Ron, was there anything about our breakup in the Prophet?"

"Err... a little..." he said, somewhat uncomfortably. "Just a short paragraph on you two having issues. Reporter came sniffing around yesterday—I didn't tell her anything, though."

Harry nodded. "I guess it's fairly obvious, anyway."

Ron just shrugged.

McGonagall cleared her throat loudly. The class froze, staring at her guiltily. "Is there anyone in here who can tell me what happens when wizards attempt to transfigure normal items into objects of value?"

Hermione's hand shot up into the air. The rest of the class stared at McGonagall blankly.

She sighed. "Anyone besides Miss Granger?" When they continued to stare at her, she tapped her wand impatiently in her hand. "It's interesting to me that no one knows, as I've been going over that very subject for the last..." she glanced at the clock, "15 minutes."

The entire class gulped. Harry was pretty sure he knew why no one was paying attention.

McGonagall's gaze swept over the classroom, making everyone, besides Hermione, squirm uncomfortably. "You will be having a test on this tomorrow. And I will not be covering this topic again. I suggest, if you desire to pass, you will be extra nice to Miss Granger this afternoon."

People were now shooting Harry accusing looks. Harry glared at them, it wasn't like he wanted them to be discussing his personal life!

McGonagall's furious gaze landed on Neville. Neville squeaked and tried to hide under the desk, but McGonagall held him firmly in place

with the slight flicker of her eyes. "Mr. Longbottom, may I ask, what is it that's so much more interesting than my class?"

Neville started sweating profusely and Harry looked at him hopefully, mentally trying to will him to lie or something. Neville opened his mouth, but only a terrified, strangled sound came out and he gave Harry a panicked look. McGonagall tapped his desk. "I don't have all day, Longbottom." Neville looked even more terrified.

The class turned suddenly when Hermione stood up. She was pale and shaking slightly, but couldn't quite seem to bear the sight of Neville looking so terrified. "Please, Professor," she whispered. "It's just that...Harry and I broke up."

McGonagall actually looked surprised. "Oh, is that what's causing such a fuss?"

Hermione nodded. "I don't think it's anyone else's business, really, but Harry does attract so much attention. And I also would appreciate it if people would stop talking about me in the halls, because I CAN hear it and it's really very annoying."

Hermione sat back down and the entire class shifted their eyes from her to Harry, holding their breath and waiting for his reaction. Harry stared straight ahead, trying to look as though he hadn't the faintest idea of what was happening.

Professor McGonagall looked at them coolly. "Personal lives are a private matter. There is no excuse for partaking in such ugly gossip of your schoolmates. Any more discussion of Mr. Potter's and Mrs. Granger's personal life will result in a detention. Do I make myself clear?"

Harry let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding when the class turned their attention back to McGonagall. No one breathed so much as a word for the rest of the time.

Harry found his gaze wandering back towards Hermione. She was hunched over her desk, her brow furrowed, the top of her quill in her mouth. She was taking notes obsessively. The hollow feeling in his

stomach increased. He felt himself fill with slight pride for her, impressed at the way that she'd not only handled McGonagall, but the gossip as well. She was the smartest witch he'd ever met.

Harry's head banged on his desk. He was doomed. He was so very doomed.

Harry left the Transfiguration classroom feeling worse than when he'd gone in. Ron had rushed off at the end to walk Hermione to her next class. Then, before Harry could escape, McGonagall gave him a long lecture on responsibilities and schoolwork and separating that from his personal life.

Harry just nodded, not really caring. He walked slowly out of the classroom and straight into the whispers in the hall. Hermione's words in class seemed only to fuel the gossip. Harry looked up in surprise when Madam Snow came rushing towards him, looking ecstatic.

"Harry Potter," she said happily, upon seeing him. "I've been hearing the most interesting rumors..."

Harry tried to brush by her, but she stayed at his elbow, a piece of parchment out and a quill hovering over it. "I'm here for the truth, Potter. You tell me what's happened and I'll write about it."

Harry sped up, Madam Snow followed.

"So," she said briskly. "Fight or breakup, what's the scoop?"

"Leave me alone," Harry whispered, hurrying to the dungeons for Potions.

The quill started scribbling. Madam Snow tried looking sympathetic. "Broke your heart, did she?"

Harry stopped. He was shaking, he was hungry, and he really wanted to go back to bed and not face the rest of the world. "It's none of your business!"

"Look," she said, "there are hundreds of rumors going around. I just want to get the real story. I want your side of the story."

"I highly doubt that," Harry muttered, trying to brush by her again.

She moved into his way. "She cheat on you? That red-haired fellow she's always hanging around with..."

Harry's eyes were stinging. "No! It was nothing like that..."

Her eyes lit up. "Then you cheated on her, but you feel terrible about it. Of course, she won't take you back because she's cold hearted and unfeeling..."

"NO!" Harry yelled again, trying in vain to get by her. "LEAVE ME ALONE! I'm going to be late!"

People in the halls weren't even pretending to be subtle anymore, at Harry's outburst they all turned and stared with wide eyes. Harry flushed, wishing that he could disappear.

Madam Snow's eyes were dancing. "So..." she said softly, "what did happen then? Exclusive interview... we can do it your way..."

Harry felt a growing sense of desperation. "Please," he was nearly begging. "Just leave me alone."

She clucked her tongue and the quill started scribbling madly again.

Harry craned his neck to see what she was writing.

He's clearly lost himself in hurt and pain. Though Harry Potter won't share what exactly happened between him and his ex-girlfriend, Hermione Granger, the truth is plain in his eyes. She has broken his heart. Terribly. And it is all he can do to struggle on...

Harry felt a terrible headache behind his eyes. "STOP!" he yelled. "IT'S NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS! LEAVE ME ALONE!"

"Now, Harry," she said softly. "That's certainly not a nice way to speak to your elders."

Harry tried to fight his way past her again, but she held an arm out, keeping him trapped. Harry's breathing increased and he was afraid that he was going to do something desperate.

There was a quiet voice from behind Madam Snow. "He said he wanted to be left alone."

Madam Snow whipped around. Her eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

"Hermione Granger."

Harry's eyes widened, feeling his chest tighten painfully. Hermione smiled reassuringly at him before turning her attention back to Madam Snow. Very calmly, she came to stand protectively in front of him.

"Ever met Rita Skeeter?" Hermione asked softly. "Funniest thing happened to her when she poked her nose into places it didn't belong..."

Madam Snow actually backed up a step, looking at Hermione uncertainly. She didn't quite know how to respond to this latest development. "Skeeter made outlandish claims and wrote stories based upon wildly fabricated lies." Madam Snow smiled sweetly. "You will find, my dear, that I pride myself on truth and integrity."

Hermione snorted. "Clearly," she said coolly. "I'm sure you're also familiar with how Skeeter was forced to stop writing her columns."

Madam Snow looked uncertain.

"No?" Hermione said, leaning forward, her eyes glinting slightly. "She wrote some outlandish claims and wildly fabricated lies about Harry. As his best friend at the time... I could hardly let her get away with it. Right, Harry?"

At the sound of his name, Harry's head snapped up. "Yeah. You, err... caught her."

Madam Snow began backing slowly away. Hermione gave her a predatory smile. "That's right," she said, as if the memory was only now just becoming clear. "I did quite a number on her, didn't I?"

"You did," Harry agreed quickly.

Hermione stalked closer to Madam Snow. "I have contacted Dumbledore," she said, the same cold note to her tone. "He doesn't like it when his students are... ambushed in the halls."

Madam Snow packed her stuff away rather quickly. "I'll just be... going now."

Hermione cocked her head. "I think that would be a very wise decision."

Madam Snow hurried off, Hermione glaring at her back.

Harry watched Hermione, his mind fiercely trying to come up with some way to thank her... without hurting both of them even more.

Before he could say anything, she turned to him, her eyes slightly moist. "You should learn to stick up for yourself, Harry," she whispered. She hugged her books to her chest, and Harry noticed that her hands were shaking. She gave him a shaky smile. "I better go... I'm really late for Potions."

Harry watched her go for a moment, blinking stupidly. Realizing that he was also late for Potions, he rushed to catch up with her. "Hermione... wait... I..."

She turned to look at him and Harry could tell that she was trying very hard not to cry. She took a deep breath. "Don't say anything, Harry," she said fiercely. "Just... don't."

Harry closed his eyes, feeling a new rush of pain sweep over him. He nodded miserably. It was probably for the best. She hurried off again and he waited a minute before following.

Potions was pure, unadulterated torture.

He lost 20 points from Gryffindor for being late. Ron and Hermione were sitting together, so he was forced to ask Neville for help on what he'd missed. Snape was all too happy to give him a zero for not having his homework, and his final potion came out pink and stringy when it was supposed to be red and thick.

On a normal day, Harry could have dealt with those things. However, the day was far from being normal.

About halfway through the class he found himself staring at Hermione again. He began to notice things that he hadn't picked up on before. Her eyes were red and rimmed with bags. Her face was uncharacteristically pale. She looked thin, like she wasn't eating enough.

Harry, suffering all the same symptoms himself, felt a little bit comforted by the fact that Hermione seemed to be in just as much pain. Especially seeing as how Hermione and Ron had just started bickering again.

"Mr. Potter," said Snape's sickly voice from behind him.

Harry jumped, nearly knocking his cauldron over in the process. He swallowed. "Yes, Sir?"

Snape sniffed Harry's potion delicately before surveying the ingredients he'd chopped up and put beside it. "Potter, when were you supposed to add the coiled root?"

Harry glanced at the clock and felt his stomach sink. "About five minutes ago," he whispered.

Snape smirked. "Correct. How often are you supposed to be stirring?"

Harry winced. "Every 30 seconds, Sir."

"Correct again. So tell me, Potter, why is it that you've been ignoring these steps when you clearly know them?"

Harry felt his face burn. "I've been... a little distracted."

"Oh?" Snape asked, feigning surprise. "Is that what you call staring at Miss Granger?"

Malfoy snickered loudly.

Harry shut his eyes, wishing that Snape would have pity on him and leave him alone. "I wasn't staring at her," he said in a hoarse voice.

"Well, then," said Snape lightly. "We'll say you were watching her."

Malfoy snickered again.

Harry stared very hard at his cauldron, wishing that he could disappear.

Snape's mouth twisted into a feral grin. "There won't be any... watching... in my classroom, Potter. I think another 20 points from Gryffindor should make that quite clear."

The Gryffindors were furious.

"But, Sir!" they protested. "He wasn't even doing anything!"

"Silence," Snape said coldly. "Eyes on your own cauldron, Potter!"

Harry stared very hard at his potion, his throat burning. He was absolutely mortified, and he could hear whispered snatches of conversation around him. The loudest of which was coming from Malfoy, who wasn't even bothering to try and be quiet about it.

"Well, yes, of course!" he was saying to Crabbe and Goyle. "I have the hardest time looking away from Miss Granger myself... however, I guess I have enough self-control..."

Crabbe, Goyle, and several other Slytherins laughed. Snape pretended not to notice.

Pansy Parkinson joined in. "I heard she cheated on him. With Weasley."

Malfoy sounded delighted. "He was probably the only one that would take her..."

They laughed loudly again.

Harry concentrated on his potion, adding the ingredients and stirring it frantically.

"Of course," Malfoy said, "maybe the love potion wore off..."

There was more snickering.

"Potter's probably trying to figure out just what he was thinking," Pansy added cruelly.

"SHUT UP!"

The Slytherins looked up hopefully. The Gryffindors moaned, sensing that they were about to lose more points.

Ron had his wand out and his face was so red it matched the colour of his hair. "You..." he panted, staring at Malfoy. "Have... no... right...."

Hermione stood next to him, looking tearful. "Ron," she whispered. "Stop... you're only making things worse."

Harry found himself on Ron's side. If he hadn't been so afraid that Snape would expel him, he probably would have had the exact same reaction. Careful not to take his eyes off his cauldron, he silently willed his red-haired friend on.

"Weasley," Snape said silkily. "I'm afraid that, due to your outburst, it's only fair that I take another 20 points from Gryffindor."

The Gryffindors moaned again. "But, Sir!" they yelled, outraged. "Malfoy started it... he was saying all kinds of horrible things about—"

Snape flicked his eyes coldly over the classroom. "I haven't heard Malfoy breathe so much as a word since he came in. Unlike most of you, he's been working diligently on his assignment."

Malfoy smirked.

Ron was so furious that he stopped paying attention to what he was doing. He was throwing so many ingredients haphazardly into his potion that it exploded, drenching the entire room. He was covered in red potion, which smoked lightly at his robes and left an awful stench. Snape looked positively delighted when he told him his potion would be receiving a zero.

Hermione, for her part, seemed near tears. Harry kept hearing her wail directions at Ron out of the corner of her mouth, and considering Ron had already messed his potion up, it was far from doing anything to help either of them.

"But you weren't supposed to add the devil's snare and the grumpweed together!" she moaned loudly. "That's why it exploded!"

Ron scowled harder. "Yours is coming out fine, I don't see why you need to make me feel bad about mine."

Hermione let out a loud sniffle. "I'm just trying to help!"

At the sound of tears, Ron backpedaled rather quickly. "You are helping," he squeaked nervously.

Harry looked over at them, wincing when Snape caught him. "Mr. Potter," he said severely. "What did I say about your eyes?"

"They're supposed to be on my cauldron," Harry muttered angrily.

"Yes. Yes, that's right."

Harry threw some more ingredients into his potion, glaring at it when it hissed at him and bubbled angrily. When class ended, he filled a veil up with his pink liquid and nearly ran out of the room.

And so the day continued. Harry came to expect loud whispers to follow his every movement in the hall. Ron divided up his time between Harry and Hermione fairly equally, though generally walking Hermione to and from each class. Harry thought it was a mark of just how miserable Hermione was that she didn't even notice.

Harry decided that getting through each day was an act of surviving. He'd completely given up on doing homework, and soon he fell so behind in all his classes that he stopped paying any kind of attention. He stopped talking to everyone but Ron and, after being particularly grouchy with Hedwig, lost the comfort of his owl, as well.

Harry felt like the only thing that he still enjoyed and looked forward to every day was Quidditch. He drove his team hard, holding practices four times a week, no matter what the weather was. Ron had started accusing him of being just as bad as Angelina Johnson and Oliver Wood.

Some part of Harry realized that he was being slightly obsessive, but mostly he didn't care. When he was riding a broomstick nothing else mattered. The entire world fell away and all he felt was the air rushing past his face. His mind would clear, his entire being focused on finding the Snitch and winning their match. For a few blissful minutes he could put Hermione, Voldemort, and Sirius away.

Harry also knew that, besides himself, their team wasn't anything special. Ron was an okay Keeper and their three Chasers were fairly good. Their Beaters, though, were a long way off from the Weasley twins. He hoped that what his team lacked in talent they could overcome with sheer will.

So Harry concentrated on Quidditch. He slept more than he needed. He ate less than he needed. He avoided contact with Hermione at all costs, as merely seeing her was enough to send him into a near

coma-like state. And he hoped, at some point, the roar of pain would eventually turn into a dull ache. And that the dull ache would be enough to function.

Harry spent the entire weekend in bed.

He stared at the ceiling blankly when he was awake and spent most of his time dozing or sleeping heavily. He hid under his blankets, and didn't breathe so much as a word to anyone else.

Harry hadn't been aware that there was a pain like this. Everything hurt. He had trouble breathing, he had trouble thinking, and he had trouble remembering why he was at Hogwarts in the first place. The pain was consuming. He felt like someone had run a truck into him and then left him out on the hot pavement to die and be eaten by vultures.

The weekend past in a fit of uneasy dozing and periods of blankness where Harry's sole goal was to think as little as possible. Every time he did, he would see Hermione's face crumble as he broke both their hearts.

Late Sunday night, Ron hovered awkwardly over his bedside. "Harry... you haven't left this room all weekend, mate. Can't be healthy..."

Harry ignored him and hoped he'd go away. He could appreciate Ron's concern... but he was about the last person he wanted to share the news with.

Ron cleared his throat. "Did you and Hermione have... err, a fight?"

Harry curled tightly into a ball. "Go away," he said.

Ron sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. "She's spent the entire weekend in the library. She comes out to eat every once and a while, but she looks terrible. All splotchy and stuff, likes she's been crying a lot."

Harry didn't want to hear about what kind of pain Hermione was in. It only made him feel worse. "Go away, Ron," he repeated.

"Why don't the two of you, I dunno, just make up or something? Probably make both of you a whole lot more bearable to live with."

Harry desperately wished that Ron could have given him this much support only two weeks earlier. Harry sat up, feeling lightheaded and looked Ron in the eye. "We broke up," he said flatly.

Ron looked startled. "You broke up?"

Harry felt a fresh wave of pain and he hugged his knees to his chest. His throat was feeling scratchy so he only nodded.

"I can't bloody believe it," Ron muttered. "She break up with you?"

Harry shook his head.

Ron's eyes got even wider. "You're mad! Why would you do a thing like that for?"

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and let out a deep breath. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I thought that you were falling in love with her."

Harry was having trouble breathing. "Ron," he said desperately. "Please. I don't want to talk about it."

Ron stared at him, still looking rather surprised. "Okay, sure. Whatever you say."

"Ron, I need to ask you a favour."

Ron blinked at him. "Erm... okay..."

"It's... Hermione." Harry felt dizzy as he said her name. Saying it reminded him of how far away from him she was. "There's going to be... a lot of backlash. Just watch out for her, okay? I mean, she's more than capable of handling herself, but after what happened with Jane Noxon..."

"Yeah, of course." Ron thought about it for a moment before grinning. "Think she'll let me follow her into the bathroom?"

Harry doubted it and didn't, in all actuality, want to think about it. "Just make sure no one curses her with her back turned, okay?"

"Yeah, of course... I mean, I'd do that anyway."

Harry lay back down and rolled over, so he wouldn't have to look at Ron anymore. Ron would be able to see Hermione at breakfast the next morning. Ron would be able to ask her for homework. Ron wouldn't have to worry that Voldemort would try and destroy at him by destroying those he loved most...

Harry shut his eyes, trying to will his mind blank so that he could block out the pain. He felt the bed shift and knew Ron had left.

It was the worst weekend of Harry Potter's life.

Monday morning was the worst morning of Harry Potter's life. Harry wasn't sure if it was Ron who blabbed, but everyone knew by Monday morning that he and Hermione had split up.

Harry awoke to a vicious headache, a dry throat, and hunger pains in his stomach. He was trembling when he dressed. He didn't want to go down to the Great Hall for breakfast because he knew Hermione would be there and he wouldn't be able to sit next to her, or kiss her good-morning, or steal her coffee, or read her paper...

He went down with Seamus and Dean, his legs feeling shaky and rubbery. They kept shooting him odd glances, as if they wanted to say something but didn't really know what. When he stumbled down the last few stairs, they took a step back, looking at him like he'd become something they didn't understand.

"You all right there, Harry?" Seamus asked, sounding like he hoped Harry wouldn't answer him.

Harry clutched his books tightly and nodded, going on ahead of them

He heard Dean whispering in slight worry behind him. "A girl is having this much effect on him... a girl."

"It's so sad..." Seamus added.

"I never want a girlfriend, if this is what happens to you..."

"Harry's really quite pathetic, isn't he?"

"Never thought I'd see the day when the Boy Who Lived would get his heart ripped out by a girl..."

"Hermione no less..."

Harry stopped and turned around. "I can hear you!"

Dean and Seamus gave him patronizing looks as if dealing with a child. "Sure, Harry. Whatever you say."

Harry stared open-mouthed at them before continuing on to the Great Hall.

"See!" Dean said triumphantly from behind him. "He's cracking up..."

"Completely insane..."

"I CAN STILL HEAR YOU!" Harry hollered.

"Now he's hearing things!" Dean said frantically.

"He's too far gone!"

Harry gave up. He stomped into the Great Hall, feeling lightheaded and nervous. He stopped suddenly in the entrance, barely twitching when Seamus and Dean crashed into him.

Hermione was sitting at the far end and her eyes met his from across the room. Harry felt dizzy and only started moving again when Seamus jabbed him in the back and pushed him forward.

"Really, Harry, have you ever considered professional help?" he asked.

Harry ignored him, still staring avidly at Hermione. She looked pale and was clutching her coffee mug rather tightly. He was somewhat reassured (though also quite jealous) to see Ron at her elbow, furiously copying down what appeared to be her homework.

Harry fell into a seat next to Dean, still watching Hermione and Ron carefully. Dean followed his gaze and shook his head sadly.

"Ahhh... the day the famous trio split up..."

"It's okay, Harry," Seamus said. "You can form another trio with us. We'll let you be our leader and everything."

Harry helped himself to a rather large plate of food, eating it mechanically while he watched Hermione. "Uh huh," he said, not having heard a word.

Dean and Seamus looked at each other worriedly. "This is so pathetic," Seamus muttered.

"Really, Harry. Go on the rebound. Go nuts. Have a one-night stand with someone. I bet you loads of girls would be up for it. Then you can dump them the next day and break their hearts into a thousand shards."

"Uh huh," Harry answered again.

Harry was nearly certain that Hermione was watching him back. Of course, she was being a little bit subtler about it. She glanced in his direction every once in a while before hurriedly shifting her eyes back down to her plate, the newspaper, or Ron. Harry just stared at her openly, not quite able to help himself.

"So, a one night-stand, then," Seamus was saying. "Okay. So someone hot, preferably low on the brains."

"Long, straight hair," Dean continued. "Blue eyes?"

"Sure," Harry answered absently. "Whatever you come up with will be great."

Dean and Seamus looked at each other again.

"Hey, Harry," said Dean. "I'm thinking about walking into the Forbidden Forest without my wand. I think I'll bring Neville with me for protection... and I'm planning on yelling really loudly."

"Have fun," Harry said, a bit dazed.

"Let me handle this one," said Seamus, winking at Dean. "Harry, I was just curious... now that you and Hermione have broken up... I'm sure that you wouldn't have any problems with her going out with Ron."

Harry's head snapped around so fast that he almost broke his neck. "WHAT?"

"Well, you know," Seamus said innocently. "They've always had U.R.S.T."

"What the hell is U.R.S.T.?"

"Unresolved Sexual Tension," Dean answered.

Harry nearly fell off the bench. "They do NOT!"

Seamus nodded and looked at Dean. "Am I right?"

"You are most certainly right."

Seamus turned back to Harry, looking smug. "Arguing... one of the most telltale signs of U.R.S.T.!"

"They do not have unresolved sexual tension!" Harry cried, sounding frantic. "They don't have sexual tension at all!"

"Oh, there they go again..." Dean said, nodding in their direction.

Harry whipped back around. Sure enough, Ron and Hermione were arguing. Ron appeared to be holding one of Hermione's books in the air above her head and she was jumping wildly for it. They could hear her shrieking from all the way across the room.

"Ron Weasley, you give me that book back RIGHT NOW! Or I WILL curse you within an inch of your life! AND THEN I WILL TAKE THAT INCH!"

"U.R.S.T." Seamus said calmly, eating a sausage and watching Harry eagerly for a reaction.

"Definite U.R.S.T." Dean added.

Harry watched as Ron, who seemed to take Hermione on her word, handed her the book back. As soon as she had possession of it, she began hitting him with it. Harry winced, noting that it was a hardcover book and looked rather large.

"Yep," Seamus said proudly. "Can feel the heat coming off those two in waves."

"That's like second base for them," Dean pointed out. "You and Hermione ever get to second base?"

Harry was certainly not going to be sharing that kind of information with Seamus and Dean. He scowled.

"They're just arguing. They're angry. It doesn't mean anything!"

Seamus snorted. "Sure, Harry. As long as you believe that."

Dean peered at Ron and Hermione curiously. They were both glaring ahead of them, sniping angrily at each other every few moments. "See... the thing with arguing is... it's the only way they know how to express themselves. It's a way of covering up for their real feelings, if you know what I mean."

"THEY DON'T HAVE ANY REAL FEELINGS!"

Heads from all over the hall turned in Harry's direction. He slumped down in his seat, trying hard not to look at anybody.

It didn't matter. He and Hermione weren't together anymore. She could have U.R.S.T. with whomever she wanted to have U.R.S.T. with and he didn't have any right to get upset about it. Even if it was Ron.

Eyes sad, he tried to smile and Seamus and Dean. "So... this one night stand..." he asked casually.

They looked delighted.

"Oh, we knew you would come out of it, Harry!" Seamus cried jubilantly.

"You've learned an important lesson," Dean said with uncharacteristic seriousness. "Girls are pretty. Girls are fun to look at. Most usually a girl is fun to snog. However, having feelings for a girl..."

Seamus shuddered. "Bad idea, mate."

Harry was quite inclined to agree with them.

Ron sat next to him in Transfiguration. Harry was grateful. He'd been worrying that Ron would pick sides, and the natural side for him to pick would be Hermione's. Instead, Ron surprised him by dumping his stuff down next to him and saying, "I highly doubt anyone would try and curse Hermione under McGonagall's nose. Mind if I sit here?"

Harry just stared at him. "Err... yeah, sure."

"You okay, Harry?" Ron asked, a little concerned. "You're awfully pale."

Harry just nodded. "Well, you know, I haven't eaten much in the last few days."

Ron snorted. "Or at all." He studied him curiously for a moment, as if trying to decide something. "Hermione's worried about you," Ron shared quietly.

Harry felt his stomach flutter. "She is?" he whispered.

Ron nodded and scowled slightly. "Bloody annoying, really. Gets all teary-eyed and everything every time someone so much as mentions your name."

Harry smiled slightly as McGonagall came into the room. "Thanks."

Ron just shrugged and pulled out his homework. Harry stared at it stupidly, suddenly realizing that he hadn't done his. In fact, he hadn't done any homework.

The hair on the back of his neck prickled and he looked up, only to find Hermione staring at him from across the room. She looked startled and quickly bent down over her notes. Harry stared at her a while longer, wondering if she was having as difficult a time with their separation as he was.

He began to notice that people in the class were nudging each other and pointing in his direction. Despite McGonagall's strict classroom, he began to hear bits and pieces of conversation.

"So it is true..."

"I knew all along... quite clear when they didn't sit together at breakfast..."

"See the way he's looking at her? Broken hearted, he is..."

"Maybe they're just fighting?"

"Naw... bit over the top for a fight..."

"I was so sure it was meant to be, after reading that interview..."

Harry felt sick. He glanced at Ron. Trying to appear as if he was taking notes (he hadn't heard a word McGonagall had said), he asked, out of the corner of his mouth, "Ron, was there anything about our breakup in the Prophet?"

"Err... a little..." he said, somewhat uncomfortably. "Just a short paragraph on you two having issues. Reporter came sniffing around yesterday—I didn't tell her anything, though."

Harry nodded. "I guess it's fairly obvious, anyway."

Ron just shrugged.

McGonagall cleared her throat loudly. The class froze, staring at her guiltily. "Is there anyone in here who can tell me what happens when wizards attempt to transfigure normal items into objects of value?"

Hermione's hand shot up into the air. The rest of the class stared at McGonagall blankly.

She sighed. "Anyone besides Miss Granger?" When they continued to stare at her, she tapped her wand impatiently in her hand. "It's interesting to me that no one knows, as I've been going over that very subject for the last..." she glanced at the clock, "15 minutes."

The entire class gulped. Harry was pretty sure he knew why no one was paying attention.

McGonagall's gaze swept over the classroom, making everyone, besides Hermione, squirm uncomfortably. "You will be having a test on this tomorrow. And I will not be covering this topic again. I suggest, if you desire to pass, you will be extra nice to Miss Granger this afternoon."

People were now shooting Harry accusing looks. Harry glared at them, it wasn't like he wanted them to be discussing his personal life!

McGonagall's furious gaze landed on Neville. Neville squeaked and tried to hide under the desk, but McGonagall held him firmly in place

with the slight flicker of her eyes. "Mr. Longbottom, may I ask, what is it that's so much more interesting than my class?"

Neville started sweating profusely and Harry looked at him hopefully, mentally trying to will him to lie or something. Neville opened his mouth, but only a terrified, strangled sound came out and he gave Harry a panicked look. McGonagall tapped his desk. "I don't have all day, Longbottom." Neville looked even more terrified.

The class turned suddenly when Hermione stood up. She was pale and shaking slightly, but couldn't quite seem to bear the sight of Neville looking so terrified. "Please, Professor," she whispered. "It's just that...Harry and I broke up."

McGonagall actually looked surprised. "Oh, is that what's causing such a fuss?"

Hermione nodded. "I don't think it's anyone else's business, really, but Harry does attract so much attention. And I also would appreciate it if people would stop talking about me in the halls, because I CAN hear it and it's really very annoying."

Hermione sat back down and the entire class shifted their eyes from her to Harry, holding their breath and waiting for his reaction. Harry stared straight ahead, trying to look as though he hadn't the faintest idea of what was happening.

Professor McGonagall looked at them coolly. "Personal lives are a private matter. There is no excuse for partaking in such ugly gossip of your schoolmates. Any more discussion of Mr. Potter's and Mrs. Granger's personal life will result in a detention. Do I make myself clear?"

Harry let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding when the class turned their attention back to McGonagall. No one breathed so much as a word for the rest of the time.

Harry found his gaze wandering back towards Hermione. She was hunched over her desk, her brow furrowed, the top of her quill in her mouth. She was taking notes obsessively. The hollow feeling in his

stomach increased. He felt himself fill with slight pride for her, impressed at the way that she'd not only handled McGonagall, but the gossip as well. She was the smartest witch he'd ever met.

Harry's head banged on his desk. He was doomed. He was so very doomed.

Harry left the Transfiguration classroom feeling worse than when he'd gone in. Ron had rushed off at the end to walk Hermione to her next class. Then, before Harry could escape, McGonagall gave him a long lecture on responsibilities and schoolwork and separating that from his personal life.

Harry just nodded, not really caring. He walked slowly out of the classroom and straight into the whispers in the hall. Hermione's words in class seemed only to fuel the gossip. Harry looked up in surprise when Madam Snow came rushing towards him, looking ecstatic.

"Harry Potter," she said happily, upon seeing him. "I've been hearing the most interesting rumors..."

Harry tried to brush by her, but she stayed at his elbow, a piece of parchment out and a quill hovering over it. "I'm here for the truth, Potter. You tell me what's happened and I'll write about it."

Harry sped up, Madam Snow followed.

"So," she said briskly. "Fight or breakup, what's the scoop?"

"Leave me alone," Harry whispered, hurrying to the dungeons for Potions.

The quill started scribbling. Madam Snow tried looking sympathetic. "Broke your heart, did she?"

Harry stopped. He was shaking, he was hungry, and he really wanted to go back to bed and not face the rest of the world. "It's none of your business!"

"Look," she said, "there are hundreds of rumors going around. I just want to get the real story. I want your side of the story."

"I highly doubt that," Harry muttered, trying to brush by her again.

She moved into his way. "She cheat on you? That red-haired fellow she's always hanging around with..."

Harry's eyes were stinging. "No! It was nothing like that..."

Her eyes lit up. "Then you cheated on her, but you feel terrible about it. Of course, she won't take you back because she's cold hearted and unfeeling..."

"NO!" Harry yelled again, trying in vain to get by her. "LEAVE ME ALONE! I'm going to be late!"

People in the halls weren't even pretending to be subtle anymore, at Harry's outburst they all turned and stared with wide eyes. Harry flushed, wishing that he could disappear.

Madam Snow's eyes were dancing. "So..." she said softly, "what did happen then? Exclusive interview... we can do it your way..."

Harry felt a growing sense of desperation. "Please," he was nearly begging. "Just leave me alone."

She clucked her tongue and the quill started scribbling madly again.

Harry craned his neck to see what she was writing.

He's clearly lost himself in hurt and pain. Though Harry Potter won't share what exactly happened between him and his ex-girlfriend, Hermione Granger, the truth is plain in his eyes. She has broken his heart. Terribly. And it is all he can do to struggle on...

Harry felt a terrible headache behind his eyes. "STOP!" he yelled. "IT'S NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS! LEAVE ME ALONE!"

"Now, Harry," she said softly. "That's certainly not a nice way to speak to your elders."

Harry tried to fight his way past her again, but she held an arm out, keeping him trapped. Harry's breathing increased and he was afraid that he was going to do something desperate.

There was a quiet voice from behind Madam Snow. "He said he wanted to be left alone."

Madam Snow whipped around. Her eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

"Hermione Granger."

Harry's eyes widened, feeling his chest tighten painfully. Hermione smiled reassuringly at him before turning her attention back to Madam Snow. Very calmly, she came to stand protectively in front of him.

"Ever met Rita Skeeter?" Hermione asked softly. "Funniest thing happened to her when she poked her nose into places it didn't belong..."

Madam Snow actually backed up a step, looking at Hermione uncertainly. She didn't quite know how to respond to this latest development. "Skeeter made outlandish claims and wrote stories based upon wildly fabricated lies." Madam Snow smiled sweetly. "You will find, my dear, that I pride myself on truth and integrity."

Hermione snorted. "Clearly," she said coolly. "I'm sure you're also familiar with how Skeeter was forced to stop writing her columns."

Madam Snow looked uncertain.

"No?" Hermione said, leaning forward, her eyes glinting slightly. "She wrote some outlandish claims and wildly fabricated lies about Harry. As his best friend at the time... I could hardly let her get away with it. Right, Harry?"

At the sound of his name, Harry's head snapped up. "Yeah. You, err... caught her."

Madam Snow began backing slowly away. Hermione gave her a predatory smile. "That's right," she said, as if the memory was only now just becoming clear. "I did quite a number on her, didn't I?"

"You did," Harry agreed quickly.

Hermione stalked closer to Madam Snow. "I have contacted Dumbledore," she said, the same cold note to her tone. "He doesn't like it when his students are... ambushed in the halls."

Madam Snow packed her stuff away rather quickly. "I'll just be... going now."

Hermione cocked her head. "I think that would be a very wise decision."

Madam Snow hurried off, Hermione glaring at her back.

Harry watched Hermione, his mind fiercely trying to come up with some way to thank her... without hurting both of them even more.

Before he could say anything, she turned to him, her eyes slightly moist. "You should learn to stick up for yourself, Harry," she whispered. She hugged her books to her chest, and Harry noticed that her hands were shaking. She gave him a shaky smile. "I better go... I'm really late for Potions."

Harry watched her go for a moment, blinking stupidly. Realizing that he was also late for Potions, he rushed to catch up with her. "Hermione... wait... I..."

She turned to look at him and Harry could tell that she was trying very hard not to cry. She took a deep breath. "Don't say anything, Harry," she said fiercely. "Just... don't."

Harry closed his eyes, feeling a new rush of pain sweep over him. He nodded miserably. It was probably for the best. She hurried off again and he waited a minute before following.

Potions was pure, unadulterated torture.

He lost 20 points from Gryffindor for being late. Ron and Hermione were sitting together, so he was forced to ask Neville for help on what he'd missed. Snape was all too happy to give him a zero for not having his homework, and his final potion came out pink and stringy when it was supposed to be red and thick.

On a normal day, Harry could have dealt with those things. However, the day was far from being normal.

About halfway through the class he found himself staring at Hermione again. He began to notice things that he hadn't picked up on before. Her eyes were red and rimmed with bags. Her face was uncharacteristically pale. She looked thin, like she wasn't eating enough.

Harry, suffering all the same symptoms himself, felt a little bit comforted by the fact that Hermione seemed to be in just as much pain. Especially seeing as how Hermione and Ron had just started bickering again.

"Mr. Potter," said Snape's sickly voice from behind him.

Harry jumped, nearly knocking his cauldron over in the process. He swallowed. "Yes, Sir?"

Snape sniffed Harry's potion delicately before surveying the ingredients he'd chopped up and put beside it. "Potter, when were you supposed to add the coiled root?"

Harry glanced at the clock and felt his stomach sink. "About five minutes ago," he whispered.

Snape smirked. "Correct. How often are you supposed to be stirring?"

Harry winced. "Every 30 seconds, Sir."

"Correct again. So tell me, Potter, why is it that you've been ignoring these steps when you clearly know them?"

Harry felt his face burn. "I've been... a little distracted."

"Oh?" Snape asked, feigning surprise. "Is that what you call staring at Miss Granger?"

Malfoy snickered loudly.

Harry shut his eyes, wishing that Snape would have pity on him and leave him alone. "I wasn't staring at her," he said in a hoarse voice.

"Well, then," said Snape lightly. "We'll say you were watching her."

Malfoy snickered again.

Harry stared very hard at his cauldron, wishing that he could disappear.

Snape's mouth twisted into a feral grin. "There won't be any... watching... in my classroom, Potter. I think another 20 points from Gryffindor should make that quite clear."

The Gryffindors were furious.

"But, Sir!" they protested. "He wasn't even doing anything!"

"Silence," Snape said coldly. "Eyes on your own cauldron, Potter!"

Harry stared very hard at his potion, his throat burning. He was absolutely mortified, and he could hear whispered snatches of conversation around him. The loudest of which was coming from Malfoy, who wasn't even bothering to try and be quiet about it.

"Well, yes, of course!" he was saying to Crabbe and Goyle. "I have the hardest time looking away from Miss Granger myself... however, I guess I have enough self-control..."

Crabbe, Goyle, and several other Slytherins laughed. Snape pretended not to notice.

Pansy Parkinson joined in. "I heard she cheated on him. With Weasley."

Malfoy sounded delighted. "He was probably the only one that would take her..."

They laughed loudly again.

Harry concentrated on his potion, adding the ingredients and stirring it frantically.

"Of course," Malfoy said, "maybe the love potion wore off..."

There was more snickering.

"Potter's probably trying to figure out just what he was thinking," Pansy added cruelly.

"SHUT UP!"

The Slytherins looked up hopefully. The Gryffindors moaned, sensing that they were about to lose more points.

Ron had his wand out and his face was so red it matched the colour of his hair. "You..." he panted, staring at Malfoy. "Have... no... right...."

Hermione stood next to him, looking tearful. "Ron," she whispered. "Stop... you're only making things worse."

Harry found himself on Ron's side. If he hadn't been so afraid that Snape would expel him, he probably would have had the exact same reaction. Careful not to take his eyes off his cauldron, he silently willed his red-haired friend on.

"Weasley," Snape said silkily. "I'm afraid that, due to your outburst, it's only fair that I take another 20 points from Gryffindor."

The Gryffindors moaned again. "But, Sir!" they yelled, outraged. "Malfoy started it... he was saying all kinds of horrible things about—"

Snape flicked his eyes coldly over the classroom. "I haven't heard Malfoy breathe so much as a word since he came in. Unlike most of you, he's been working diligently on his assignment."

Malfoy smirked.

Ron was so furious that he stopped paying attention to what he was doing. He was throwing so many ingredients haphazardly into his potion that it exploded, drenching the entire room. He was covered in red potion, which smoked lightly at his robes and left an awful stench. Snape looked positively delighted when he told him his potion would be receiving a zero.

Hermione, for her part, seemed near tears. Harry kept hearing her wail directions at Ron out of the corner of her mouth, and considering Ron had already messed his potion up, it was far from doing anything to help either of them.

"But you weren't supposed to add the devil's snare and the grumpweed together!" she moaned loudly. "That's why it exploded!"

Ron scowled harder. "Yours is coming out fine, I don't see why you need to make me feel bad about mine."

Hermione let out a loud sniffle. "I'm just trying to help!"

At the sound of tears, Ron backpedaled rather quickly. "You are helping," he squeaked nervously.

Harry looked over at them, wincing when Snape caught him. "Mr. Potter," he said severely. "What did I say about your eyes?"

"They're supposed to be on my cauldron," Harry muttered angrily.

"Yes. Yes, that's right."

Harry threw some more ingredients into his potion, glaring at it when it hissed at him and bubbled angrily. When class ended, he filled a veil up with his pink liquid and nearly ran out of the room.

And so the day continued. Harry came to expect loud whispers to follow his every movement in the hall. Ron divided up his time between Harry and Hermione fairly equally, though generally walking Hermione to and from each class. Harry thought it was a mark of just how miserable Hermione was that she didn't even notice.

Harry decided that getting through each day was an act of surviving. He'd completely given up on doing homework, and soon he fell so behind in all his classes that he stopped paying any kind of attention. He stopped talking to everyone but Ron and, after being particularly grouchy with Hedwig, lost the comfort of his owl, as well.

Harry felt like the only thing that he still enjoyed and looked forward to every day was Quidditch. He drove his team hard, holding practices four times a week, no matter what the weather was. Ron had started accusing him of being just as bad as Angelina Johnson and Oliver Wood.

Some part of Harry realized that he was being slightly obsessive, but mostly he didn't care. When he was riding a broomstick nothing else mattered. The entire world fell away and all he felt was the air rushing past his face. His mind would clear, his entire being focused on finding the Snitch and winning their match. For a few blissful minutes he could put Hermione, Voldemort, and Sirius away.

Harry also knew that, besides himself, their team wasn't anything special. Ron was an okay Keeper and their three Chasers were fairly good. Their Beaters, though, were a long way off from the Weasley twins. He hoped that what his team lacked in talent they could overcome with sheer will.

So Harry concentrated on Quidditch. He slept more than he needed. He ate less than he needed. He avoided contact with Hermione at all costs, as merely seeing her was enough to send him into a near

coma-like state. And he hoped, at some point, the roar of pain would eventually turn into a dull ache. And that the dull ache would be enough to function.

It was nearing a month after the breakup when Harry's worst fears came true. Ron was attempting to help Harry with his miles of unfinished homework, but he was becoming increasingly annoyed with just how far Harry had fallen behind.

Harry tried to ignore the twisting in his heart when he spied a page of Hermione's notes in Ron's hand. Was she worried about his complete lack of enthusiasm for schoolwork? Was she the one that asked Ron to help him out? Did she even care any more?

'Of course she cares,' a part of his mind said. 'Breaking up doesn't mean that your feelings just disappear.' Harry shook his head in a vain attempt at thinking. He was tired of dwelling on Hermione. He was tired of hurting.

Hermione spent all her free time in the library. She never sat in the common room anymore and only came up when she went to bed. Harry took his cues from her and stopped going to the library, sending Ron if he needed a book for a class.

Ron, for his part, thought the entire thing was ridiculous. "It won't kill you to be in the same room with her, you know!" he'd said after Harry had sent him on an errand to the library. "You do it in class plenty. You wouldn't have to talk to her or anything, just go silently by her to get your damn book."

Harry, who thought that having class with her was torture enough, had just stared at him until he squirmed and said. "Oh, all right! But you owe me..."

Harry looked at Ron now, who was pouring over an old page of Harry's notes and looking frustrated. "I don't even remember doing this stuff!" he snapped. "When was the last time you took any notes?"

Harry just shrugged. "I dunno."

Ron stared at him in vague disgust. "Harry you have to start paying attention! They'll kick you out, you know, if you don't keep up."

Harry, who'd never really considered that possibility, felt his stomach take a long dive. "Then... give me your old notes. I'll copy them all down."

"My notes won't do you any good, you know that."

Harry sighed. "Then what am I supposed to do?"

"You could ask—"

"No."

"I'm sure she wouldn't say—"

"No."

Ron looked pained and he shut his books. "Harry... there's something that you should know."

Harry stared at him, waiting patiently for him to continue.

Ron took a deep breath and continued. "The other day... well, I asked Hermione to go to Hogsmeade with me this weekend."

Harry felt all the colour drain from his face. "Oh," he whispered.

Ron squirmed uncomfortably. "She said yes."

"Oh," Harry said again, feeling a cold pain work its way into his stomach. "That's... I'm happy for you Ron," he said, in a hollow voice. "I know you've liked her for ages."

Ron seemed very distracted by looking at the floor. "Yeah... Harry, I'm sorry."

Harry gathered up his stuff. "It's fine, Ron. We're not... it's been a month." Standing, he looked at him, trying very hard to smile. "I am happy for you. I've just... I've just remembered, though... I have to go..."

Harry ran out of the common room, went straight up to his dorm, threw himself face down on the bed, and prepared to stay there until he awoke and discovered that the entire thing was a nightmare.

Ron and Hermione were going to Hogsmeade together.

It meant that... not only had Hermione moved on (Harry's stomach gave a furious little lurch), but that she'd also moved on to... Ron.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. The last time he'd felt pain like this... it had been right after the breakup.

But, really, wasn't this what he'd wanted, after all? Wouldn't Hermione be much safer with Ron? And if Harry could have picked anyone for her, shouldn't it be his best friend? Shouldn't it be Ron, who'd liked her for ages?

Harry's head pounded. He didn't want to think about it. Thinking about it made him feel sick and guilty and like he was a horrible friend. Because really, all he wanted to do was go kill Ron. Painfully. Preferably multiple times. And then he wanted to resurrect Ron and kill him again for daring to go near his Hermione. Then he'd find Hermione, bend down, and beg until she'd take him back because he'd been so stupid to let her go in the first place... so very stupid...

When Friday night rolled into Saturday morning, Harry had yet to move a muscle. He'd slept fitfully, fully clothed, praying that Ron wouldn't try and talk to him again.

When Ron woke up the next morning, he stood awkwardly beside Harry's bed for about 10 minutes without saying anything. Finally, clearing his throat, he managed, "Are you going to Hogsmeade today, Harry? Because... because it might be good for you..."

Harry didn't bother looking up. He was afraid seeing Ron would cause him to start crying hysterically. "No."

Ron sounded relieved. "Oh, okay, then. Maybe you should try and catch up on your homework."

"Yeah."

Ron sighed. "Harry, I'm sorry. I really am. I know that you aren't over her yet, but..."

"It's fine. Go... have fun. You guys deserve it."

Ron shifted uncomfortably for another moment, clearly wanting to say something else but not sure how to go about it. Finally, he turned and left, leaving Harry blissfully alone.

An hour later, Harry made his way down to the common room, a stack of books under his arm. Ron was right about one thing. He did have to try and do his homework. The common room was empty but for some second and first years milling about. Harry growled at them, holding up his wand.

"GET OUT!"

They got out.

Feeling slightly cheered up, Harry curled up in an armchair and opened his first book Transfiguration: Year 6. Harry stared down at it bleakly. He couldn't even read the words on the page.

He'd never taken Hermione to Hogsmeade. Of course, they hadn't really dated long enough for that to be possible. But Harry wondered if he should've at least asked her. Cho had certainly seemed to expect it...

Harry wondered where Ron and Hermione went. The Three Broomsticks, perhaps? To start off slow. Maybe they'd finally gotten past the arguing... and on to their "real feelings" as Dean and Seamus had put it. Then, that would mean they were probably...

"Mr. Potter, could I have a word?"

Harry looked up sharply, the book sliding off his lap. Professor McGonagall was standing in the entrance way, her piercing eyes surveying him. She didn't seem to be particularly angry, but Harry

had learned that Professor McGonagall wore the same annoyed expression most of the time.

He got up, feeling nervous. "Sure, Professor."

"My office."

Harry followed her out of the common room and to her office, feeling increasingly uneasy as he went.

She sat behind her desk and pointed to a small chair in front of it. "Sit, Potter."

He sat, trying to look innocent. He couldn't for the life of him figure out anything he'd done wrong recently...

"Why didn't you go to Hogsmeade today, Potter?" she asked kindly.

Harry looked at her in surprise. "Err... didn't feel like it..."

She frowned. "Potter... many of us on the staff are... concerned about you."

Harry just stared at her, surprised to see her look somewhat uncomfortable.

She sighed painfully. "Your work, Potter. Hogwarts has a certain level of excellence it projects. We expect all of our students to pass their courses. You are currently failing each and every one of yours. We can't make special allowances."

"What are you saying?" Harry whispered.

She looked sad. "I am saying, that unless you manage to pull it together by the end of this year, you will not be returning to Hogwarts."

Harry's stomach bottomed out. He felt like he'd just jumped out a 100-story building. He couldn't imagine... being expelled from Hogwarts because he was failing? He always knew that his rule

breaking could get him serious trouble one day... but being kicked out because of his marks?

McGonagall seemed to sense his desperation. "Let me assure you, Potter. There is... almost no one here that wants to see that happen. However, that is no excuse. You are a bright, powerful wizard. I am deeply disappointed that you have suddenly turned a deaf ear to your studies."

Harry turned his eyes to the floor, not quite sure what he could say to that.

"In the mean time..." McGonagall paused and let out a breath. "I'm afraid that I'm going to have to suspend you from the Quidditch team."

Harry nearly fell out of his chair. "But, Professor!" he protested loudly. "You can't be serious! They can't win without me... you know that!"

Professor McGonagall didn't even blink. "Potter, your well-being is more important than whether or not Gryffindor wins the Quidditch cup."

Harry looked up at her. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? I'll try harder. I'll go over everything I've missed. Just... I need Quidditch. It's the only time where I don't have to think... it's the only thing I have left..."

Knowing it was useless, Harry stared furiously down at his clenched hands in his lap. He could slowly feel every inch of his life crumbling away beneath him. Hermione was gone. Quidditch was gone. Hogwarts would soon be gone...

McGonagall drew in a sharp breath. "Rest assured, Potter. I don't get any pleasure out of saying this to you."

Harry kicked miserably at the floor. "What do I have to do to get back on the team?"

"As soon as you raise your marks in every class, and I mean every class, you will be permitted to re-join the team. You're next match is three weeks away. It's not impossible, but it will be difficult."

Harry nodded mutely, wondering how in the world he was going to raise his marks at all in Potions. "Even classes taught by the head of Slytherin?" Harry asked quietly.

McGonagall gave him a tight smile. "We'll see."

Harry stood up. "I guess I should go and start working then."

"There is one more thing."

Harry sighed and sat back down. "I'm concerned that you're... losing touch with others. You're only confidant seems to be Mr. Weasley and..."

Harry stared at her, feeling a sharp, red anger begin to pool in his stomach. He welcomed it, silently reveling in feeling something besides the soul-wrenching pain he'd been wearing like a cloak. McGonagall knew so little about his life. She had no knowledge of the prophecy, or his feelings for Hermione, or the pain he'd been facing since the breakup. It embittered him to know that she thought she had any right to go poking into his life.

Furious, Harry stood, knocking his chair backward in the process. He met Professor McGonagall's somewhat stunned gaze. "I appreciate the concern, Professor," he said, his voice tight and perfectly-controlled. "Though I hardly think it's your place to express it. You don't know the first thing about what I'm going through. Excuse me."

Then, not quite able to believe he'd actually said that to a Hogwarts' teacher, Harry left without saying another word.

Anger evaporating as quickly as it had come, Harry rushed back to the common room, half expecting McGonagall to run after him to tell him he was being expelled immediately. Upon reaching the common room without any interruptions, he sank back down in his chair with relief.

Shaking, he picked up his books. He was determined to make the three-week deadline. He would be playing Quidditch again. He couldn't imagine life without it...

Harry studied for the entire day, barely stopping for lunch. Things weren't making much sense, but he was reading and re-reading chapters. He at least felt like he might have a slight idea what teachers would be talking about on Monday. With some reluctance, he admitted to himself that he'd never truly be able to catch up unless he asked for help. Namely help from Hermione. And that was something he really didn't want to have to do.

When the Hogsmeade students began returning, Harry stiffened and tried to concentrate on his books. It was a useless cause. He was petrified. Other couples were returning, looking flushed from the slightly wintery temperatures outside but happy from their day. Seamus Finiggan and Lavender Brown came giggling in, barely noticing that there was anyone else in the common room.

Harry stared back down at his book. The be-witching of Muggle artifacts can be traced throughout time. However, with the dawn of the Industrial Revolution and, more recently, the Technological Revolution, mixing magic with Muggle inventions has become a more lucrative practice...

More couples were returning. Ginny and Dean came in, holding hands and staring into each other's eyes.

Harry concentrated. ... has become a more lucrative practice as most objects find themselves back in Muggle households, seriously endangering...

Parvarti Patil and her boyfriend of the moment came in. They didn't even bother to be subtle about it, but curled up by the fire and immediately began snogging.

Harry grit his teeth. ...most objects find themselves back in Muggle households, seriously endangering the...

Hearing a noise, Harry looked up. His eyes widened to find Ron standing over him, his face red to the tips of his ears, and huffing and puffing. Harry was so startled that he could do nothing but stare.

Ron glared at him. "GET UP!"

Harry got up uncertainly. It was then that he realized that Ron's fist was coming through the air towards him. Harry ducked from pure, wild instinct. Ron punched the open air, stumbling slightly on his feet.

Harry scrambled behind the couch, heart beating very fast. Ron chased him around the couch and Harry backed away from him, holding his hands out. "Bloody hell, Ron!" he yelped. "What are you doing?"

Ron stalked towards him, punching one fist into the other. "I JUST SPENT FOUR HOURS IN HOGSMEADE WITH HERMIONE LISTENING TO HER CRY OVER YOU!"

Harry stumbled into the wall, and Ron's fist came at him again. He ducked, and Ron hit the wall, cursing loudly as he did so.

Harry rolled weakly out of the way and stood woozily on his feet again. "Ron... what... what are you doing?"

"Trying to kill you," he said, rushing Harry again.

Harry backed away from him, holding out his hands in defense. "Ron," he said faintly. "I don't think this is such a good idea..."

"Hold still, will you?" Ron growled, launching his fist in Harry's general direction again.

Harry easily moved out of the way and Ron nearly fell over. This, of course, only succeeded in making him angrier. Harry was somewhat horrified to see spit flying out of the corner of Ron's mouth. He stared at his best friend for a moment, making a split decision.

"JUST HOLD ON ONE MINUTE!"

Ron stopped, still spitting, eyes wide and furious.

Harry took off his glasses. He sighed. "Okay, let's get this over with it."

Ron punched him.

Harry's head snapped back, his cheek bursting alive in pain. He squeezed his eyes shut, wondering if Ron was about to pop him another one. After a moment, Harry felt he was safe. Cradling his wounded cheek gently, Harry slowly opened his eyes.

Ron had thrown himself into Harry's vacated armchair and Harry was very much relieved to see that his face was almost a normal colour again.

Still holding his wounded cheek, Harry hesitantly sat in the chair next to Ron. "Do you... do you want to talk about it?"

Ron glared at him. "No."

Harry thought for a moment. "Would it help if I told you that McGonagall kicked me off the Quidditch team?"

"A little," Ron said moodily.

"So..." Harry tried, not quite able to resist himself. "How did your date go?"

Ron shot him a murderous look.

"Oh." Harry said, feeling hope soar in his chest. "Err... my cheek really hurts. I think you might have broken something."

Ron's eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah. I might have to go down to the hospital wing."

"So you really think it might be broken?" Ron asked eagerly. "Are you in a lot of pain?"

"So much pain I can hardly think straight."

That seemed to cheer Ron up. "And... and McGonagall kicked you off the team?"

"Yep."

"Wicked."

"They might even expel me from Hogwarts."

Ron grinned. "Even better."

Harry let out a wry snort. "Thanks for the support."

"No problem," Ron said, still grinning.

Harry sobered. "What happened?"

Ron sighed, eyes darkening. "Hermione's not even close to getting over you," he shared quietly. "She, err... didn't realize that I asked her to Hogsmeade as any more than a friend."

"Really?" Harry said, not quite able to contain his joy.

"Yeah, for such a snotty know-it-all, I reckon she still has no clue." Ron seemed very interested in the floor. "Though... she's been slightly distracted as of late..."

Harry stared at him helplessly. "Ron... I'm sorry. I am. I wish... well, I didn't want things to turn out this way."

Ron blinked at him as if seeing him for the first time. "Yeah, I know."

Harry studied him for a moment, mentally debating with himself. "What did..." he began hesitantly. "What did she say about me?"

Ron jerked a shoulder. "Lots and lots." He thought for a moment. "Well, she's worried that you're not keeping up with your schoolwork."

Harry found himself blushing. "Err... well, that's... awfully perceptive of her, really..."

"I tried to tell her that they probably wouldn't expel you." Ron made a face. "Naturally, she just heard the word 'expel.' Next thing I knew, she was crying and sobbing and blubbing on."

"She... she was crying over me?" Harry asked, sounding a little hoarse.

"Once the dam breaks..." Ron said with a shake of his head. "I don't understand why she couldn't just talk to Ginny about all this stuff. What the hell did she expect me to do about it?"

Harry's gaze shifted to the floor. "I guess she just needed comfort. She needed someone who cares about her. She needed..." Harry shrugged. "Damned if I know, but I'm glad that it was you."

Ron heaved a great sigh. "I'm not," he said. "I hate it when women cry. I hate it. You wouldn't believe it, Harry, but I actually truly hated you there for a while."

"Honestly? My throbbing cheek wouldn't be all that surprised."

Ron gave him a wry grin and shook his head. "She told me a lot," he said softly. "She told me... well, she told me why you broke up with her."

Harry's hands instinctively clenched. "She did?"

"It only made her care about you more," Ron added, a hint of bitterness in his voice. "She thought you were being all noble and chivalrous."

"She thinks I'm noble?" Harry repeated, a small grin forming on his mouth. "And chivalrous? She said that?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yeah, she also said the words, 'that moron,' 'stupid, idiot boy,' and 'insensitive prat' several times as well. But who's keeping track?"

"She thinks I'm stupid?" Harry echoed, feeling his stomach bottom out.

Ron ignored him. "She said she tried a spell to make herself forget about you but that she couldn't go through with it at the last minute."

A spell! Why hadn't Harry thought about it before? He was a wizard! Hermione was on to something. If he cast a spell to make his feelings go away...

Ron saw the look in his eyes. "No. No way, Harry. There's too much that could go wrong. Besides, is that what you really want? To forget everything you two shared?"

"Ye—of course not, Ron," Harry said.

Ron looked at him suspiciously. "I'm serious, Harry. I've seen what these forgetting spells can do to a person. You could lose your entire memory, you could end up insane, you could lose your mind—"

"Okay," Harry interrupted. "I get the point. And anyway," he continued morosely. "I wouldn't have any idea how to go about casting one."

"Right," Ron said, not sounding very reassured. Deciding to change the subject he said, "She spends every waking moment worrying about you. Not that she didn't use to, but I think it's worse now that you two aren't talking to each other."

Ron shifted uncomfortably, looking like he was about to go on before thinking better of it. Harry had a sudden, sinking suspicion. "Ron," he said slowly. "Did she tell you about the prophecy?"

Ron nodded, looking slightly uncomfortable. "Yeah. I'm sorry, Harry. It's... I can't even imagine...." He frowned resolutely. "You're not alone," he said quietly. "I'll be there with you until the bitter end."

Harry blinked at him in surprise, feeling a warm comfort from his words. "I... really?"

"Don't be so thick, Harry. Of course I will be." His voice dropped. "I'm your best friend."

They stared at each other for a moment and Harry felt something inside him begin to heal. "You know," he said. "You're the guy who just punched me."

Ron shrugged. "Harry, if you spent four hours with Hermione listening to her blubber on about me, what would you do?"

"Oh, I'd punch you," Harry said immediately. "Then I'd torture you for hours. And then I'd kill you."

Ron grinned. "This is ridiculous. The pair of us fighting like five-year olds over Hermione. I mean, she's not even... it's... well, it's Hermione!"

"I know," Harry said softly. "I can't believe it, either. When did it all get so complicated?"

"Um, let's see. When did Hermione suddenly develop breasts?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "You've been looking at Hermione's breasts?"

"Bloody hell, Harry!" Ron yelped. "I just happened to notice! It's natural! It's what boys do!"

"Well, fine," Harry grumbled. "But I don't like it."

Ron scoffed. "Oh, shut your hole. I caught you looking at my little sister's breasts the other day!"

"What?" Harry demanded, feeling uncomfortable all of a sudden. "I would never..."

"Sure," Ron said easily. "I'm just saying, we're getting older. It was sort of inevitable that she'd have to pick one of us in the end."

"Maybe," Harry admitted grudgingly. "I guess she made the wrong choice."

Ron stared at him for a long time before shaking his head. "I don't think there was ever any choice, Harry," he finally said softly. "It's always been you. I was just too thick to realize it. I always hoped..." Ron sighed heavily. "It doesn't matter. The point is, things for her were decided a long time ago."

Harry's heart soared. Some part of his logical mind realized that this only made things worse. It didn't matter how much distance he put between himself and Hermione—their feelings would still be there. But after being convinced that Hermione had moved on to his best friend, Harry thought Ron's words were the most incredible things he'd ever heard.

"You really think so?" Harry managed to choke out.

Ron's eyes darkened. "Yeah. She'll never love me. Not the way I want her to, at least."

Despite his intense relief and joy, Harry felt a large pang of pity for his red-head friend. "This whole thing is so bugged up," he muttered. "Maybe, I dunno, it would have been a lot better for everyone if Hermione had chosen you."

"You know," Ron said slowly. "I've thought that a lot, that things would have been better if she had. But, let's face it, Harry, any girl that you ended up falling for would be in danger. Besides, Dumbledore once told me that there's no use dwelling on 'would have's.' It's not worth it."

"I suppose," Harry mumbled. "I mean... yeah. You're right."

Ron stared at him for a moment, as if just realizing something. "Harry," he said in a wondrous voice. "Do you reckon I should try and get over her?"

Harry rubbed his eyes wearily. "I dunno, Ron. I can't get over her."

Ron snorted. "Yeah, but you're in love with her."

"Hermione tell you that, too?"

"No," Ron said, grinning cheekily. "That I figured out on my own."

Harry took a deep breath. "Ron... do you think... do you think that I did the right thing when I broke up with her?"

"I dunno, Harry," Ron said seriously. "I understand why. So does Hermione. But honestly... it seems an awful lot like it isn't worth it."

Harry clenched his jaw. "Voldemort would... he would use her against me. I know he would."

"Maybe," Ron conceded. "Or maybe you could give Hermione a little more credit."

"Credit?" Harry yelped. "This is Voldemort! He's the most powerful wizard in the world... Hermione wouldn't have a chance against him..."

Ron scowled. "I don't know, okay? I'm just telling you what I think."

"Which is what?"

Ron looked uncertain. "That... that I don't know."

"Gee, Ron... that was... thanks. A lot, really."

"Do you want me to hit you again?"

Harry rubbed at his face. "No."

"Then shut your bleedin' trap and let me help you with your homework. We have a game coming up in three weeks, you know! AND WE NEED A SEEKER!"

two days later and Ron was threatening to go to Hermione unless Harry magically grew a brain and started absorbing things. Harry was very much afraid that he had a point. He was grateful for Ron's support, but Ron really wasn't the best of teachers and as much as they tried, Harry was still miserably behind.

"That's it, then," Harry said, as they made their way down to Hagrid's hut for Care of Magical Creatures. "You're just going to have to find someone to replace me as Seeker. You can take the captaincy... you'd be a great captain."

Ron looked horrified. "Are you kidding? I can barely go out onto the Quidditch pitch without passing out! I wouldn't last five minutes as captain! Besides, how are we going to train a new Seeker in a matter of weeks?"

Harry shrugged. He wasn't any happier about the prospect than Ron was. "Ginny," Harry said. "She can do it. She did last year. Finding a new Chaser would be a little bit easier."

Ron shook his head. "There's no way, Harry. We'll never win without you. We both know it."

Harry kicked miserably at a pebble. "I'm trying. I just don't think there's any way I'll ever catch up. And Snape will never pass me."

"Harry," Ron said quietly. "If you really wanted to catch up—"

"Yeah, I know. Let me think about it, okay?"

Ron nodded bleakly as they neared Hagrid's hut. "Just don't think too long about it."

Hagrid beamed at him as he approached.

"All righ' there, Harry?" he asked.

Harry just shrugged. Hagrid knew that things were far from being okay. However, Hagrid certainly seemed cheerful as he swung a large axe jauntily between his hands.

"Today," he said, once the class was assembled in front of him. "We're goin' to continue our first lesson on Yarmuchs. Interestin' little buggers. Everyone did the required research on them I hope?"

Most of the class stared at him in surprise. Harry hadn't the vaguest idea of what he was talking about.

Hagrid looked a little dismayed. "Oh, I see," he said, sounding much less happy. "Well, I suppose it was a while ago. How about a volunteer pair? We can work from there..."

The entire class backed up a step.

Hagrid looked cheerful again. "Let's see here... Harry and Hermione. That should work nicely."

Hermione gasped out loud. "Hagrid!" she said faintly. "I don't think that's a very good idea..."

Hagrid looked a little put out. "Why not?"

Harry still wasn't quite sure what was going on, but he didn't like it. He didn't like it at all.

"Hagrid, I think she's right," he said quietly. "This probably isn't a very good idea."

Hagrid grinned. "'Course it is! They're just Yarmuchs..."

"Oh, all right," Hermione said crossly. She approached Hagrid cautiously. Harry followed, uncomfortably aware of the fact that he was standing nearer to her than he had in over a month. She noticed, too, and let out a sharp breath.

Hagrid began striking the ground with the axe and Harry's eyes got very wide as the memory hit him. Yarmuchs! The creatures who's

colour was based upon feeling.... Suddenly panicky, Harry's wide-eyes met Hermione's.

"I know!" she hissed quietly. "That's why I didn't... oh no..."

A ball shot up in the air and hovered for a moment before disappearing.

The class o'd and ahh'd. "D'ya see the colour it turned?"

"Looked like bright red to me..."

More round balls shot up in the air. Most of them were pulsing red. Others were black, while others still changed from red to black and back again as if trying to make up their minds.

Harry didn't think it took a genius to figure out what the colours stood for. He began to wish he hadn't gotten out of bed that morning.

Hagrid looked ecstatic. "Workin' perfect-like!" he declared. "Who knows what emotions the Yarmuchs are standin' for"

Hermione had gone very pale. "Please, Hagrid..." she whispered. "Please, don't..."

"Harry?" he prodded, as if he hadn't heard anything Hermione had said.

Harry just shrugged helplessly. "I didn't do the research. I'm sorry, Hagrid."

Hermione sent him a betrayed look. "Don't make me say it!" she said shrilly.

"Aww, Hermione...", Hagrid said, looking a little bit downcast. "Yeh're the on'y one that did the work."

Hermione's eyes filled with tears. "Fine," she whispered. "Fine..." shaking, she pointed to the Yarmuchs. "Red stands for... love... and... and passion...and... trust...." Quivering even more and her

voice becoming higher pitched she went on. "Black means sadness or... depression... or...." She shook her head, a tear sliding down her cheek. "It's not a very nice feeling," she said quietly.

Harry felt all the colour drain from his face. He watched Hermione helplessly "Hagrid, stop. Make them go away... this is hurting her..."

Hermione covered her face with her hands. "I can't!" she sobbed. "I'm sorry, Hagrid... I have to..."

Without another word, shoulders shaking, Hermione turned and started running towards the castle. People moved out of her way to let her pass, giving Harry accusing looks as they did so.

Harry watched her stupidly as she made her way to the castle. Feeling completely useless, he clenched his fists. "Hagrid, that wasn't a very nice—"

"Go after her, Harry," Hagrid said quietly, sounding sad.

Harry blinked. "Err... I..." A hundred reasons for why that was such a bad and dangerous idea popped into his head. He ignored them. Without realizing quite what he was doing, Harry tore after her.

He was a faster runner, but she had a good head start on him and when Harry made it to the castle, he found the halls completely abandoned. He looked left and right, frantically trying to figure out where she might have gone. Finally, something in his brain clicked and he chose the left. He ran down it, the pounding of his feet echoing through the hall.

Reaching Moaning Myrtle's bathroom he slowed and pushed the door open. Loud sobbing met his ears. Slightly relieved that he'd found the right place, Harry proceeded cautiously.

Moaning Myrtle floated up. "Oh, it's you, is it?" she asked in her hiccuppy voice. "Haven't seen you in a while. You never came to visit me..."

Harry pushed past her. "Hermione?" he whispered.

The sobbing stopped. "Go away!"

Harry smiled faintly. "You know I'm not going to."

"Horrible isn't it?" Myrtle asked, not sounding at all horrified. "Probably all torn up about some boy."

Harry swallowed nervously. He approached the stall Hermione was holed up in. Pushing the door open, he found her sitting on the toilet, eyes red and blurry. She didn't look up. Her shoulders shook slightly.

"Please go away, Harry," she whispered.

Harry crouched down beside her. "Not a chance."

She shook her head. "You're only making things worse... there's nothing that you can do..."

Harry shook his head. "Hermione... I hate this. I hate seeing you in pain."

"Then go away!"

She stared sobbing again, drawing her knees up to her chest.

Harry reached out, gently drawing her against him. She went easily, pressing her face against his chest, muffling her sobs. Her tears soaked through his shirt, but he barely noticed. He stroked her hair and murmured things in her ear, not quite sure what he was saying, but hoping they calmed her down, nonetheless.

Her sobs quieted until they became choked cries. Harry continued to rock her, leaning back against the bathroom door.

"It's okay, Hermione," he whispered, holding her tighter. "It's okay..."

"It's not okay," she wailed. "And you know it."

"Shhh..." Harry said desperately.

"No! I WILL not SHHH!" she pulled away from him, her face streaked and angry. "I HATE this! I HATE what this is doing to ME! I HATE WHAT THIS IS DOING TO YOU! I CAN'T do this anymore, Harry!"

Harry felt a pounding behind his eyes. "Okay," he said calmly. "Then... we won't. We'll figure something out..."

Hermione let out a loud shriek of frustration. "Just! JUST SHUT UP!"

Harry, a little taken aback, jerked backwards and banged his head against the bathroom door. He rubbed at it petulantly, staring at Hermione with wide eyes.

"SAY SOMETHING!" she hollered.

"Um... okay... let's see..."

She started sobbing again. "Why? Why are we doing this to ourselves?"

"Because!" Harry said forcefully. "Because... because of Voldemort and a bunch of other things that makes sense! It does, Hermione, I know it does because... because..."

"BECAUSE IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE!"

"BECAUSE I REFUSE TO LET VOLDERMORT USE YOU AGAINST ME!"

Hermione cried harder. "Don't yell at me..." she whispered. "Just... don't..."

"You just yelled at me!"

"I yelled at you because you can take it right now and I CAN'T!"

Harry tried to take in several calming breaths. "I'm sorry," he whispered, tucking a lock of hair between her ear. "I didn't mean to yell."

She just shook her head. "Why won't you just leave me alone?"

"Because... I can't..."

"You've left me alone for a month and that hasn't seemed to bother you," she said bitterly. "Do you have any idea what I've been going through?"

"If it was anything like I was going through," Harry said quietly, "then I have a pretty good idea."

She hiccuped, trying to get her tears under control. "Please... go away..."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, hating the pain he heard in her voice. "No," he said again. "You're right... we can't let things go on like this. We have to... talk."

Hermione stood up suddenly. "Fine," she snapped, opening the stall's door rather forcefully so it hit Harry in the head. "Let's talk."

Harry rubbed at his head and followed Hermione out into the bathroom. He watched as she splashed water on her face and frowned at her reflection in the mirror. Her red eyes stood out on an otherwise pale face and her hair was matted and limp.

"You look really thin," Harry said quietly. "Have you been eating enough?"

Hermione turned off the tap forcefully. "No, I haven't," she hissed. "But I hardly think you're the one who should be lecturing me on taking care of themselves."

Harry flushed. "I can't help it. I care about you. You know that."

She let out a choked scream. "THAT'S WHY WE'RE IN THIS POSITION TO BEGIN WITH! APPARENTLY!"

Harry winced and backed up a step. "Hermione... I'm sorry. I really just want to make you stop crying... I hate seeing you like this, okay? And I know I'm saying all the wrong things. I'm just trying to be honest with you."

Hermione started crying again. She wiped pathetically at her eyes, and tried to stand up straight. "You wanted to talk," she said in a tear-choked voice. "Then talk."

"I..." Harry stared at her hopelessly

"Then I'll talk!" she snapped, tears still leaking out of her eyes. "I can't watch this anymore, Harry. I'm watching you cut yourself off and it's killing me! I care about you more than anyone and I'm not allowed to do anything about it! How is that fair? How is that fair at all?"

"It's... it's not..." Harry said, beginning to get choked up himself. "But... we don't have..."

"A choice," she finished bitterly. "I know. You've taken that from me."

"Hermione," he croaked. "You don't mean that..."

"Yes I do!" she yelled, her throat hoarse. "Don't you see? The one thing you had that Voldemort didn't—people who care about you! People who love you! You're cutting yourself off so you can fight him... and becoming just like him!"

Harry stumbled backwards. "That's not true," he panted heavily. "That's NOT TRUE!"

Hermione blinked at her tears, approaching him cautiously. "The thing that made you different, the thing that makes you more powerful than him... is your ability to love, Harry. You love deeper than anyone else I know." She reached him and put her hand on his cheek. "You love me... I know you do. You should use that... not run from it."

Harry closed his eyes, acutely feeling her palm pressing against his cheek. "What do you want me to do, Hermione?" he whispered brokenly. "I'm trying... I just... I don't know what the right thing is..."

She hugged him, wrapping her arms around his neck, holding on tightly. After a moment, he responded, cradling her close, pressing his face against her neck. He shuddered and all his pent-up misery burst at the feel of having her comfort him. He let out a choked sob and she held him tighter, silently telling him it was okay. She rocked him tightly as he cried.

When he pulled away, his eyes were red and he was wearing a slightly embarrassed expression. "Sorry..." he mumbled.

"Don't you dare," she said quietly. "Not around me. Never around me."

He hung his head and nodded. "Hermione... what are we going to do?"

She let out a deep breath. "Honestly? I don't know."

"Well, clearly," Harry said, trying to sound lighthearted. "This whole 'not talking' thing isn't working."

"We were friends for five years, Harry," Hermione said quietly. "And we managed that well enough, goodness knows, without snogging. We can do it again."

Harry cracked a smile. "Yes, but you always wanted to snog me."

"So I'll keep on wanting to snog you," she replied lightly. "I just won't. And... we'll see."

"Okay," Harry said, rubbing at his eyes. "Okay. Friends. That can't be too hard, right?"

Hermione snorted. "Oh, yes. It'll be bloody fantastic. It'll be the easiest thing we've ever done."

"I'm sensing a little bit of sarcasm... and did you just swear?"

Hermione shot him a murderous look. "I'm not going to lie to you, Harry... the stuff I've been through in the past month... it's been..."

"Painful," Harry said. "It's been really... painful."

Hermione shifted closer to him, looking like she wanted to reach out, but restraining herself. "Yes, it has." She sighed and looked at the ground, a look of misery passing over her face. "And I wish I could blame you, but I don't... I can't."

"Maybe you should," Harry said quietly. "It might make things easier."

"Stop it," she said, sounding dangerously close to tears again. "It's unfair for you to ask me to suddenly just... just cut myself out of your life. It's... impossible." She looked up, meeting his eyes, a look of complete understanding flashing between them.

Six years. They'd been friends for six years. It didn't matter that what they both felt transcended friendship. It didn't matter that being friends now would only complicate things farther. Harry knew she was right. To just ignore each other in hopes that six years of shared experiences would go away... it was impossible.

Harry sucked in a sharp breath, feeling a void in his stomach begin to fill, but another, much different hole, opening in its place. "Even by being my friend—"

"Best friend," she interrupted. "Best friend."

Harry smiled. "Right. Being my best friend... it still puts you in danger. More so than Ron because I..." Harry blushed and stared at a spot on the ceiling. "Because I feel much differently towards you than I do Ron."

"What?" Hermione said, feigning surprise. "You and Ron haven't kissed in the common room yet?"

"Funny," Harry said, glaring at her. "That was very amusing."

Hermione laughed. "Oh, I'm sorry, Harry, but you were asking for it."

Harry couldn't contain his grin, the sound of her laughter after a month apart making him feel deliriously happy. "Hermione, I..." Harry trailed off, not sure what he wanted to tell her. How could he explain how relieved he was to have her back in his life? And how that relief made him feel selfish and guilty? But he couldn't imagine life without Hermione by his side—it was unthinkable. At the same time, a niggling part of his brain was warning him that he and Hermione would never be able to just be friends again.

Hermione just looked at him, her face mirroring his emotions. "I know," she said simply. "But I don't think we should just rush back into anything. I know that I..." she paused and took a deep breath. "I'm not... willing to... open myself up again like that. And you... well, honestly, I think you have quite a number of things you need to sort through."

Harry wasn't sure what she meant by that, but decided not to bring that to attention. "Actually, Hermione, I really need your help." She looked eagerly up at him, her eyes red and hopeful. He told her about how far behind he was, how McGonagall had kicked him off the team, and his worry that he wouldn't be able to come back next year if he didn't pick his grades up.

Hermione chewed her lip thoughtfully, a speculative look on her face. "Three weeks until your next game?"

"Give or take a couple of days."

"And you haven't done any work since we broke up?"

"Ron's been... attempting to help..."

"Right. He's probably been loads of help. Nice bruise on your face, by the way. How did you get that?"

"I... err... there was this door... and it was... I ran into it."

"As long as you and the door worked out your issues," Hermione said with a straight face. "That's the important thing."

"I'm pretty sure the door released whatever remaining anger it had stored up."

Hermione nodded, eyes glinting in amusement. "So... three weeks. Give or take a couple of days."

Harry looked at her pleadingly. "Can we do it?"

"Yes," Hermione answered shortly. "We'll make it. But..."

Harry groaned inwardly. "What?" he asked suspiciously.

"If I'm going to be devoting so much time to you in the next three weeks, you're going to have to do something for me."

"Like...?"

"I don't know yet. I'll let you know when I do." Seeing his widening grin, she frowned. "Not a sexual favour, Harry! FOR MERLIN'S SAKES! WE'RE JUST FRIENDS!"

"Fine," he grumbled. "I know."

"We have to get to class..."

Harry paled. "Oh, no! Transfiguration... I'm in so much trouble..."

"Oh, it hardly matters. You wouldn't have the faintest idea about what was going on, anyway."

She had a point. Harry rubbed blearily at his eyes.

Moaning Myrtle chose that moment to make an appearance. She floated up in between them, her head craning back and forth. Harry stumbled back a step when her face hovered just inches in front of his. "You look terrible," she said in her whiny voice. "All red and splotchy..." She whipped around to stare at Hermione. "You look even worse. All that emotion," she squeaked. "Leaves a mark on the skin..."

Harry didn't have time for this. He scowled. "C'mon, Hermione, let's go."

Hermione looked unsure. "She's right... we do look awful. Maybe we should try and clean up a bit first..."

Harry stared at her. "Since when does personal appearance come before classes?"

"Oh, all right!" she snapped, stalking out of the bathroom and slamming the door in his face again.

Harry followed her, ignoring a blinding headache. "You're still beautiful," he said quietly. "Even with the splotchiness."

"We're friends," she hissed.

"What? I can't think my friend is beautiful..."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because... because... it makes you see me in a non-friend way! And we're not going there!"

"Fine," Harry said huffily. "Then I think you're ugly. I'm not attracted to you at all. The very last thing I want to do is touch you."

Hermione stopped and looked at him dangerously. "You don't mean that!"

Harry scowled. "Of course I don't! I'm just trying to see you in a 'friendly' way..."

"Potter, we're going to make this 'friends' thing work if it's the last thing we EVER do!"

"It probably will be. I think it might kill me."

"Then do you want to stop talking again?" Hermione asked softly.

"No," Harry answered stiffly.

"Then stop thinking I'm beautiful!"

"You don't know what I was thinking!"

"I've known you for almost six years. OF COURSE I KNEW WHAT YOU WERE THINKING!"

Harry took a deep breath. "Look, I can't change the way I think about you. But you're right, okay? We may want to snog... we just can't."

"Believe me, the very last thing I want to do is snog right now!"

Harry stared at her. "Seriously?"

"Yes," she said firmly.

"You're lying. You want to snog me."

"No, I want to kill you."

"You don't mean that."

Hermione stopped suddenly and Harry had to swerve to the left to avoid crashing into her. "Harry," she said in a dangerous voice. "Stop flirting with me."

"Flirting? I'm not flirting..."

She scoffed. "You were."

"No... you were flirting with me."

She frowned. "Well... it has to stop. Now."

"Just answer me one thing first," Harry said. "And then I'll stop."

Hermione cast him a suspicious look. "What?"

"Did you really mean that the last thing you wanted to do was snog?"

She huffed out a breath and blushed. "Did I hurt your ego?"

"Actually..." Harry thought about it for a moment. "Yes."

"Well, if you must know, it's not exactly the last thing on my mind."

Harry let out a groan, followed by a string of curses that would have made Ron proud.

Hermione watched him, eyebrows raised in slight curiosity. "Yes?"

"Well... it's just that... this whole 'being friends' thing... it's awfully difficult." Harry glanced at his watch. "And we've only been at it for 15 minutes."

"You started it."

"It was your suggestion."

"Yes, but you broke up with me." Hermione thought for a moment. "No, it's earlier than that. You kissed me. You put us in this position in the first place. So this is really your fault."

Harry blinked at her. "Hermione, I'm really very stupid."

"Yes, you are."

"Hold on," Harry said frantically as they neared the Transfiguration classroom.

"Harry... what...?"

"Shh!" he said sharply, creeping towards it. "They're talking about us."

"Oh, not again," Hermione sighed. "I'm so tired of gossip..."

"Shh!" Harry hissed again. "I'm trying to listen."

Hermione shot him a look, but approached the classroom slowly.

"....Where did you say Miss Granger and Mr. Potter went? And it had something to do with Hagrid?" McGonagall asked faintly.

"They're working out they're issues," Ron said loudly. "Don't expect they'll be back for a while. Those two have a lot to work through..."

"Betrayer!" Hermione muttered.

"They've been gone for a while now," Seamus said. "I hope no one's been hurt."

"Well, you know," Dean said, snickering. "It's Harry and Hermione."

"First they'll try and talk out their problems," Ron added. "Then they'll try and magic them out. And then they'll both come crying to me."

"I'm never confiding in him again," Hermione said.

"Shh!" Harry snapped.

"My money's on Harry," Seamus went on. "He knows all that Dark Arts mojo that Hermione doesn't it."

"Yeah, but let's face it, Hermione's loads brighter than Harry can ever hope to be," Dean said. "Ron, what do you think?"

"Hermione," he answered immediately. "Hermione has something Harry doesn't. She can cry."

"Very true," Seamus said with a sigh. "The one thing women have that will disarm us men in a second. Harry's so screwed."

"BE THAT AS IT MAY!" McGonagall roared from the front of the room. "We still have class."

"This is ridiculous!" Hermione cried, grabbing Harry's sleeve and yanking them into the room.

Everyone turned eagerly in their direction, taking in their matching red-eyes and frazzled experiences. Harry flushed and stared at the ground.

"We're sorry, Professor," Hermione said, her voice quivering slightly. "We were just...err... there was an errand that Hagrid sent us on to do."

"An errand?"

"Yes," Hermione answered, meeting McGonagall's gaze. "You can ask him if you like. He said that it was all his fault."

"And what was the nature of this errand?"

"Personal, Professor. It would be very mortifying for Hagrid if anyone found out."

"I have no doubt of that," McGonagall said coolly. "Very well. Sit down and kindly stop taking up precious minutes of my time."

Hermione nodded, yanking Harry along. They sat next to Ron, who was grinning at them happily.

"So?" he asked eagerly, as soon as McGonagall's back was turned.

"So what?" Hermione said.

"So... is Harry going to be playing Quidditch in three weeks?"

"Yes," Hermione whispered delicately.

"So you're back together, then?"

"No... not exactly..." Harry answered slowly. "We're friends."

Ron's jaw dropped. "Friends?" he hissed.

Hermione nodded. "We thought that was the best thing for right now."

Ron groaned. "That'll last long..."

Harry shot him a look. "We've always been friends first."

"Friends with benefits," Ron muttered.

"She wants me to give her a sexual favor in return for her homework help," Harry shared quietly. "I'm not joking, either."

"HARRY!" Hermione said shrilly.

Ron and Harry grinned at each other.

"You two are not funny!" Hermione hissed, pulling out her notes and beginning to scribble madly.

Harry was impressed, considering she'd missed the beginning of McGonagall's lecture. She seemed to have a clear idea of what was going on, however, and continued to stare down at her parchment.

When class ended, the three of them happily made their way to the Great Hall. Ron couldn't stop grinning and he walked between them, chatting animatedly.

"Do you know what this means?" he chirped happily as they sat down for lunch.

"I no longer have to get fetch Harry's books from the library! I don't have to walk Hermione to and from her classes! I can sit with BOTH of you in Potions next!" Grinning, Ron decided to celebrate by heaping massive amounts of food on his plate.

Harry shot Ron an amused look as he slid in across from him. Hermione sat next to him, and Harry instinctively tensed, very aware of how close she was. She threw a large piece of parchment at him. "Here," she said. "This is how you'll be arranging your time for the next three weeks."

Harry studied it, his jaw dropping. Hermione had scheduled in everything. Times for when he'd be eating, times for when he'd be taking bathroom breaks, what he'd be studying and when, when he'd be sleeping, she'd even penciled in 'free time.'

"When did you... how did you... do this so quickly?" Harry asked, aghast.

"I did it during Transfiguration," Hermione said calmly, filling her plate with food.

"I thought you were taking notes."

Hermione waved her hand. "I already knew what Professor McGonagall was covering. I'm weeks ahead."

"You are?"

"Yes," she said tightly. "I did a lot of work so I didn't have to think about you."

"Oh."

Ron looked eager to change the subject. He grabbed Hermione's schedule from Harry's hands and hooted with laughter. "Bloody brilliant, Hermione! You even scheduled in times for when Harry and I are allowed to talk!"

"Well," Hermione said crossly. "Clearly Harry doesn't have any kind of worth ethic, or he wouldn't be where he is right now. He wanted my help, so we're doing this my way... or not at all."

"Poor lad," Ron said with a shake of his head. "There goes his life..."

"Oh, don't worry," Hermione said innocently. "I made up a schedule for you, too."

Ron stared at her, his eyes widening.

"Well, you know," Hermione said in a patronizing voice. "I can't help him learn everything. First of all, I don't even have Divination with Harry. Second of all, I have my own work to do, don't I?"

"I don't like where this is going," Ron muttered.

Hermione chuckled another large piece of parchment at Ron. "Here's yours," she said with barely concealed glee. "I know you're just as eager as I am to catch Harry up."

Harry tried in vain to stifle his grin.

Ron glared at him. "Just shut up. Shut up."

"Do you get bathroom breaks, as well?" Harry asked lightly, trying to grab at Ron's schedule.

Ron tugged it out of his grasp. "Hey, Harry! I just noticed... your eyes are looking a little red..."

Harry glared at him.

"Don't be silly, Ron." Hermione sniffed. "Why would Harry's eyes be red?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Because," he said slowly, as if speaking to a child. "Harry's very emotional. He cries a lot over you, you know."

"I do not!"

"Well, fine!" Hermione snapped. "If you don't want to follow the schedule, we can just call the whole thing off. It's not my stupid Quidditch game."

"Hey!" Harry said loudly. "I have no problem with the schedule!"

"You know what?" Ron yelled, completely ignoring Harry.

"What?" Hermione said, standing up.

Ron stood, too, and Harry hunkered down, trying to pretend like he wasn't a part of what was going on.

"I don't need a schedule to help Harry! I've been doing it FINE on my own for the past month, thanks!"

"YEAH?" Hermione shouted. "Is that what you think? Then why is he FAILING ALL HIS CLASSES?"

"WE'RE DOING FINE!" Ron bellowed.

"Err," Harry said quietly, as they continued to shout over his head. "I can hear you guys, you know..."

"Oh, really?" Hermione hissed, completely oblivious to Harry. "Fine, were you? So did he just HAPPEN to RUN into your fist? Is that it?"

"Door..." Harry protested weakly. "I ran into a door!"

Ron's face turned red. "Like you were doing much better!" he scoffed. "Hiding in the library when he CLEARLY needed YOU!"

"Well, at least I was still PAYING ATTENTION! That's more than I can say for some people!"

Harry stood up between them. "Okay!" he said loudly. "I appreciate the concern... I really do. But can you please stop yelling about me in front of everyone?"

Ron and Hermione's eyes ticked to him, as if noticing him for the first time. Hermione grabbed at Ron's schedule and clutched it to her chest.

"Fine," she snapped. "I'm sorry I suggested it. Ron you can help Harry however you like. However," Hermione fixed Harry with a piercing stare. "If you want to play in your next Quidditch match, Harry, I strongly suggest trying to convince Ron to use my schedule."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "Err..."

"Yeah," Ron said loudly. "Or you could tell Hermione that our way is fine, thanks, and that we don't need to be told when we can go to the bathroom."

"Err..."

Hermione and Ron stared at him, puffing heavily, clearly awaiting his answer. Harry, for his part, didn't think it was very fair of them to make him have to choose between them.

Slowly he sat back down. "I refuse to choose between the two of you," he snapped. "The three of us can eat lunch together—like normal, or you two can continue carrying on and I'll leave."

Harry let out a tiny sigh of relief when they sat back down next to them. They continued to stare daggers at each other through their eyes, but Harry thought it was quite the improvement.

"I think you guys have U.R.S.T." Harry said abruptly.

They looked at him in confusion. "What are you talking about, Harry?" Ron asked.

"Well, you know..." Harry said hesitantly. "U.R.S.T."

"No, we don't," Hermione said. "Or we wouldn't be asking."

Harry sighed, wondering why he'd brought it up in the first place. "Well it's...." In a rush he said, "Unresolved sexual tension."

Ron's eyes popped. "WHAT?"

Harry shrugged hopelessly. "Arguing... it's one of the most telltale signs of U.R.S.T."

"Harry, don't be ridiculous," Hermione said faintly. "There's nothing unresolved between Ron and I. Especially sexually."

Hermione put a reassuring hand over his own, and the contact sent such a jolt to Harry's system that he jumped and banged into the table.

Ron watched him through narrowed eyes. "Harry, you git. Hermione and I aren't the one's with U.R.S.T."

It took Harry nearly five minutes to figure out what Ron was talking about. He and Hermione were reaching for the pepper at the same time when their hands brushed again. He snatched his away, knocking the pepper into Neville's plate of food as he did so. Ron gave him a knowing look. Harry snuck a glance at Hermione, who looked rather flustered.

"Oh..." he said slowly.

"Yes," Ron said. "Yes. Very good."

The Trio was back together again. The news spread quickly through the school. As did the news that Harry and Hermione were not back together, but that they were, however, back on friendly terms. To Harry, things were definitely beginning to look up. Hermione was quickly catching him up on his schoolwork (though Harry found her mere presence to be somewhat of a distraction) and he and Ron had gotten their friendship back to their old familiarity. However, Ron still had yet to bring up Quidditch. Outside of their impending match, of course.

"We're so doomed," he moaned, one morning at breakfast. "We only have one week left. Harry and I haven't made any progress in Divination... his skull's too thick to absorb anything."

"Thanks, Ron."

Hermione sniffed. "You know, you could use my schedule. You'll have to tweak it a bit, of course."

Ron glared at her. "We're doing fine. We'll make it."

Harry was pretty sure that they weren't doing fine and that they wouldn't make it. And, as difficult as Hermione's schedule was to maintain, it was at least working, which was a little more than he could say for Ron's Work When we Have Time (Which Happens to be Never) policy.

"Ron," he said hesitantly. "I think it might be a good idea if we just tried it Hermione's way. Just to see what would happen."

At that moment he and Hermione both reached for the butter, brushing hands as they did so. They pulled away, blushing furiously. Harry resisted the urge to start cursing.

Ron rolled his eyes. "I can see that this 'just friends' thing is working out brilliantly."

"Shut up," Harry snapped, reaching for the butter again. He passed it to Hermione, who was trying very hard not to look at him. "Well," he asked crossly. "Are we going to use Hermione's schedule or not?"

Ron let out a breath. "Fine! We'll try it! But I'm going to the bathroom when I want!"

"Bathroom?" a disinterested voice said from behind Ron. "Bathrooms are nice..."

Ron jumped and swiveled around. "Luna?"

Luna Lovegood smiled faintly and sat down next to him. "People have died going to the bathroom before..." she said dreamily.

Ron just stared at her.

Luna stared right back at him, her large eyes blinking lazily. "I would hate to see you die in a toilet."

Ron looked fairly horrified by the idea. "Yeah," he muttered. "I would kind of hate that, too."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous!" Hermione snapped. "No one has ever died in a TOILET!"

Luna didn't appear to notice her. "It can happen, you know," she said softly, still talking to Ron. "People never pay attention when they're going to the loo... you never know what you could be sitting on..."

Ron shifted a few feet away from her. "I'll keep that in mind. Thanks."

"Your hair!" Luna said suddenly.

Ron touched his hair in sudden panic. "What? What's wrong with my hair?"

"It's red. That's the colour of love, you know."

Ron shifted a little further away from her. "Err... that's... interesting."

"I like red," Luna said softly, staring at a spot somewhere above Ron.

Ron looked up, arching to see what she was looking at. He scowled, eyeing only the ceiling of the Great Hall (it was overcast). "You're very strange," he muttered.

"Yes..." Luna said. "Yes... people say that about me. It's never bothered me..."

Ron's face heated up. "Erm... that's right. It's not necessarily a bad thing."

Luna chuckled softly. "I don't mind that you think I'm strange."

"Good," Ron said, sounding bewildered. "That's... good, Luna."

She beamed happily at him.

"I hope you do well in your next Quidditch match!" she chirped happily, standing up. She seemed to think over her words and frowned. "Of course, I rather hope Gryffindor loses since you're playing Ravenclaw, but perhaps you'll make many nice saves and it'll be your Seeker who messes up."

"Hey!" Harry said. "I heard that, you know!"

Luna blinked at him in disinterest. "Oh," she said. "It's you."

"Yeah," Harry said. "It's me. The Gryffindor Seeker."

Ron didn't seem to be paying any attention to Harry. He was watching Luna with a slightly dazed expression. "Yeah... it will probably be Harry who messes up. You know, he might not even be playing."

Harry glared at him furiously. "I heard that!"

"You'll be brilliant, Harry," Hermione said softly. "You always are. Now shush and let them flirt."

Harry's head snapped around. "Let them do what?" he demanded.

"Shh!" Hermione chastised again, watching Ron and Luna in great interest.

"I'll sing Weasley is Our King," Luna shared softly. "Before the match... to give you some good luck. Good luck is very important, you know."

"Yeah..." Ron said. "I've heard that it is."

"I know all the words."

"To luck?"

"To Weasley is Our King. I memorized them. Last year."

"Really? You did?"

Luna nodded eagerly. "Oh, yes. It's really quite a beautiful song, isn't it?"

"Well, it is about me, after all."

Luna let out a loud bark of laughter that rang through the hall and caused many students to turn their heads in interest. "Oh, Ronald. You make me laugh..."

Ron's eyes glinted eagerly. "I do?"

"Yes, you do."

Ron grinned. "It's, well... I hope to see you before the game!"

Luna blushed slightly and, grabbing her books, hurried off. Ron stared after her, a slightly bemused expression on her face. Finally, he turned back to Harry and Hermione and shook his head. "Girl's totally mad," he muttered.

Hermione smirked knowingly. Harry and Ron stared at her in slight suspicion.

"Well, what is it?" Harry finally asked.

"She fancies you, Ron," Hermione said.

Ron's eyes widened. "She does not!"

"And she has for a long time, too," Hermione added. "It's a wonder you never noticed."

"Loonie Lovegood fancies me!" Ron yelped. "That's... she's... she's completely off her rocker, Hermione!"

Harry sniggered. "Looks like."

Turning the colour of a tomato, Ron shook his head avidly. "No. No way. She fancies Harry."

"She doesn't fancy Harry," Hermione said coolly. "She fancies you."

"Yeah," Harry jumped in. "I could die in our next Quidditch match, for all she cares. You're getting your own personal cheering squad."

"Really?" Ron said, sounding hopeful. "You really think she fancies me?"

"Yes," Hermione said, sounding agitated. "And you like her, too, don't you?"

Ron shrugged. "I dunno. There's... someone else who I've liked for a long time." He gave a long sigh. "But she's never going to like me back. Maybe it's time to move on."

Hermione looked sad. "I think that would probably be a wise idea, Ron," she whispered.

TBC shortly

A/N: See. I told you. Nothing happens. Don't say I didn't warn you. g

References: I, uh, cough stole another Buffy/Angel lines for this fic. From Angel's 'I Will Remember You.' Otherwise known as the Most Heartbreaking Episode Ever.

Anyway, when Ron says that Harry and Hermione will first try and talk out their differences, and then try and magic them out, I was really inspired by this piece of witty exchange:

Doyle: "Did you hear that?"

Cordy dismissively: "Yeah, the Angel and Buffy show. First they talk out their differences, then they punch them out."

Harry learned very quickly that these so-called "study sessions" in the library with Hermione were really one big cosmic plan to torture him.

As far as studying went, things were going very well. Downright smashing, in fact. Hermione was infinitely patient, working through things step by step until Harry fully understood them. She never raised her voice with him or made him feel like he was stupid.

Their 'we're just friends' dance was exhausting, however. Harry knew they were fooling themselves. Some small part of him knew that they weren't just friends, but they were both too stubborn to admit it aloud. They both held up the charade, sat at opposite sides of the table, and tried their very best to pretend that things were normal.

"You okay?" Hermione asked softly.

Harry blinked, pulling himself out of his reverie. "Yeah," he muttered, pulling the book he was reading up in front of his face.

"How's the reading going?"

Harry stared at the book and realized that he'd been reading the same page for over ten minutes. "Not bad."

"Harry," she said quietly. "What are you reading about?"

Harry sighed and shut the book. He placed it on the table and slid it towards her. "I have no idea," he said honestly. "History? Something about transfiguration? Charms?"

"Potions," Hermione said, mouth quirking into a smile.

"Well—yeah," Harry said defensively. "I mean, I knew that..."

Hermione let out a faint sigh. "Harry, you know, if you ever want to catch up—"

"I have to concentrate, I know... I know..." he finished heavily. He stared at her for a moment, feeling a tight pain in his chest. "I'm trying,

Hermione. Really, I am. I've learned loads more in the last week with you than I did all last semester."

Hermione flushed a little at his compliment and studiously avoided his gaze. "I suppose..." she said uncertainly. "You do look tired."

"Thanks," Harry said. "Tired... the synonym for 'you look very, very bad.'"

"Oh! I'm sorry, Harry!" Hermione said faintly, looking up at him. "Not... in a bad way..." she stuttered. "Honestly, you couldn't look bad, really... not even if you were very tired... and not that I would notice..."

Hermione's eyes got very wide and she blushed before looking back down at the table again. Harry slumped in his chair. What were they trying to prove, anyway? That, if they pretended long enough, they really would be 'just friends'?

That thought disturbed him and his eyes focused back on Hermione's face. She was jotting notes onto a piece of parchment, her cheeks still rosy from embarrassment. Could he really ever resign himself to being just friends with her again? Could everything he was feeling just disappear? Could they go back to being just Harry and Hermione, best friends, and two thirds of a trio?

The problem was, Harry decided, was that he didn't know what being just friends with Hermione really meant. There'd always been something special about their relationship, even when he'd been too stupid to realize it. She'd always treated him a little differently from Ron. How long had it been since they had just been friends? Had they ever really been just friends?

Feeling decidedly confused and miserable, Harry let his head thunk against the table. "Ow," he muttered against it.

He heard Hermione shuffling around, followed by a deep sigh. "Is there something bothering you, Harry?"

Harry jerked a shoulder. "Nothing. Nothing is wrong."

"Why were you staring at me?"

Harry shut his eyes, mortified that she'd been well aware of his unashamed gaping. "Just thinking," he muttered. "Wasn't staring."

"Well—okay," Hermione said, sounding unconvinced. "How about we move on from potions?"

Harry shrugged, keeping his forehead on the table.

"Let's see..." Hermione said thoughtfully. "How about Charms? We could work on elemental charms..."

"Sure," he said against the tabletop. "Sure. That sounds nice."

"There was a great book I read on the subject after Flitwick gave his lesson..." Hermione mused. "I think it's in aisle ten... no, nine... yes, that's where it is..."

Harry stood up. "I'll get it," he mumbled. "What was it called?"

Hermione fiddled nervously with her quill. "I'm not certain, elemental charms may have been in the title... or, no, perhaps it was in Intermediate Charms?"

"Well, that narrows it down," Harry said sarcastically.

Hermione's eyes registered hurt. "You know, Harry," she said very quietly. "You could afford to treat me with a little more respect, considering what I'm giving up to help you out."

Harry hung his head. "I'm sorry."

"That's quite alright."

Their eyes met and Harry desperately wanted to reach out and touch her, just let her know that was grateful, more grateful than she could ever know.

"Hermione..." he whispered, feeling a lump in his throat.

Her eyes filled a little and she chewed her bottom lip nervously. "Get the book, Harry."

He blinked, holding her gaze for another moment, before turning stiffly to look for the book. He shuffled over to aisle nine, staring very hard at the floor. He ducked into the bookshelves, letting out a little breath as he did so.

He was surprised to find Ernie Macmillan standing at the very end of the aisle, staring intently at a spot on the stacks and mumbling to himself. Harry frowned in his direction, trying to decide whether or not he should say something, when Ernie looked up.

"Oh, hi, Harry," Ernie Macmillan said, looking a little flustered. "What are you doing here?"

Harry stared at him. "Looking for a book."

Ernie blinked a few times. "Right, good, good... carry on..."

Harry watched as Ernie shifted uncomfortably and Harry began to wonder just what, exactly, the Hufflepuff had been staring at. He moved closer to him. "What are you doing here?"

Looking intensely uncomfortable, Ernie took a few steps backwards. "Looking for a book," Ernie said quickly. "What else would I be doing?"

"Dunno," Harry answered, reaching him and curious to see what had held his attention.

Harry craned his neck, noticing that a few books had been shifted out of the way on the bookshelf. He stood on tiptoes, surprised to see a small, circular hole cut into the wood of the stacks. He leaned closer to it, surprised to find that he had an almost perfect view of Hermione. Very slowly, Harry turned back around and met Ernie's embarrassed expression.

"You were staring at Hermione?" Harry asked, feeling baffled.

Macmillan took another few steps backwards. "Well—no—yes... not really staring, per se... I was more, well..."

"Well?" Harry prodded in a low voice, taking a step closer to him.

Macmillan banged against the stacks on the other side. "Harry, don't get me wrong, everyone knows that you and Hermione were..." he swallowed heavily. "But... that's in the past, right?"

Harry felt his blood pressure go up a few notches. "Yeah?" he said dangerously.

Macmillan tried to smile. "I mean, you two are only just friends, right?"

"Yeah," Harry snapped, still stalking towards him. "We're just friends. But Ernie... you don't want to mess with my friend... believe me..."

"C'mon, Potter," Macmillan said, a little bit of anger creeping into his voice now. "That's not fair. Either you're together or you're not, and if you're not... well, I think it's high time that Hermione start to move on..."

"I wouldn't finish that sentence if I were you, Macmillan," Harry hissed, getting up into his face. Macmillan had a good half foot on him in height, but Harry fixed him with his most imitating glare. "Careful, I am Harry Potter, after all. Five time defeater of Voldemort..."

Ernie flinched at the name, much like Harry had hoped he would. "Are you threatening me?"

Harry took out his wand and jabbed it at Ernie's chest. "Guess I am, Macmillan."

"You can't threaten a prefect!"

"Oops. Too late."

"She's not your property," Ernie Macmillan said carefully, looking a little fearfully down at Harry's wand. "You can't—"

"And you don't have any right to... to...." Harry trailed off, getting angrier by the moment. "Stare at her!"

Macmillan sniffed, giving Harry a scathing look. "Potter, I hardly think that you have any right to—"

There was a loud, shocked gasp, causing both boys to freeze. "Harry... Ernie..." Hermione's voice said faintly. "Good heavens, what are you doing?"

Harry scowled, keeping his wand trained upon Ernie. "I'm about to beat the stuffing out of Ernie Macmillan here, what does it look like I'm doing?"

"Harry, you're not serious..." Hermione trailed off. "You are serious..."

Macmillan shifted uncomfortably, giving Harry a look of utter disdain. "Ms. Granger," he said in a tight voice. "He is serious... quite disturbed I believe..."

Harry couldn't believe his ears. "Ms. Granger?" he repeated. "Ha! Like that'll win you any points!"

"Harry!" Hermione said sharply. "You can't just go around attacking students! Prefects, no less!"

Harry's scowl deepened. "Will you excuse us, Hermione? This is between Ernie and me."

"Ms. Granger," Ernie repeated again, all smoothness. "If you could, perhaps, alert a teacher... I don't wish to put you into any unnecessary harm..."

"Unnecessary harm???" Harry echoed, feeling his anger sore to new levels. "If you think, for one minute, you stupid, brainless git that I would ever harm Hermione..."

"Harry, this is so ridiculous," Hermione snapped. "I really will get a teacher if you don't cut it out..."

"Apparently," Harry said, voice tightly controlled. "Macmillan here has been studying you for sometime... waiting for the opportune moment, I suppose..."

"Oh, I see," Hermione said in resigned voice.

"Well," Macmillan said, drawing himself up to his full height and puffing out his cheeks. "Ms. Granger's an intelligent young women, it was only a matter of time before she'd begin to look for an intellectual equal, rather than piteously helping a friend learn spells far below her—"

"I'm warning you, Macmillan," Harry said, so angry now his fists were shaking. "If you try and tell me what Ms. Granger needs one more time I'll—"

"Harry, that's enough!" Hermione yelled.

She grasped his arm, physically pulling him away from Ernie Macmillan. Harry allowed her to do so, but continued to glare at Ernie over the top of her head. As soon as Harry was a safe distance away, Macmillan pulled out his own wand and turned his nose up in the air.

Hermione shoved Harry rather roughly against the other side of the bookshelf. "What were you thinking?" she snapped at him.

Harry set his jaw, eyes blazing. "He was practically drooling all over you! He was about to ask... ask you to... I don't know! Date him or something!"

"Harry," she said, still gripping his arm. "He's allowed to ask. And I'm allowed to give my own answer..."

Harry felt himself deflate as her words sunk in. The anger left him and he was left with the bone-crushing realization that she was right.

"Yeah... but..." he whispered. "He's so... stuck up. You can't honestly tell me you'd ever..."

"Harry," she whispered, meeting his eyes. "You don't honestly believe that, after everything... I would start dating the first person who asked me?"

Harry hung his head. "Well..." he said, beginning to feel stupid. "I guess not..."

Hermione finally removed her hand from his arm, taking a step back and looking awkward. "This is so stupid..." she muttered. "Honestly! That I would even entertain the idea! Don't you know, Harry? I'm still hung up on you."

Harry felt a slight blush rise in his cheeks. "I—really? So... if he had asked... you would've said...?"

"I highly doubt he'll be asking me anything... after what you just put him through..."

"He deserved it," Harry reflected darkly.

"Oh, I have no doubt that he didn't," Hermione said lightly. "Now... go. I'm going to talk to him."

"You're what?" Harry exploded. "Talk to him? What would you want to do that for?"

"Harry..." she said warningly.

Harry looked away. "Hermione," he said quietly. "I can't help it. When I think about you with someone else..." he took a breath. "I know, I shouldn't be jealous, I have no right to be jealous, but I can't... I can't help it..."

He felt Hermione's lips brush against his cheek, and he turned back to her, startled. She looked back at him, a small smile curving on her lips. "Harry, there's no need to be jealous. I promise you. Now... go back out there... and I'm going to talk to Ernie and get your book."

Harry nodded, casting a suspicious look in Macmillan's direction. "Okay," he said. "I just—I have one question."

"Yes?"

"Could we be very platonic friends who sometimes kiss and never see other people?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and pointed to the table. "Go. Study. I'll be there in a moment."

Harry looked in Macmillan's direction one last time, catching his eye, before deliberately bending down and brushing his lips over Hermione's forehead. "That was purely platonic..." he said quietly as he pulled away.

Hermione blushed. "I have no doubt that it was..." she said faintly.

Feeling like he'd adequately gotten his point across, Harry returned to the table. He dropped into his seat, keeping his eyes trained on the bookshelf where Hermione was talking to Macmillan. If the sleazy Hufflepuff so much as put a hand on his Hermione...

'She's not yours anymore,' said a voice in his head, who sounded remarkably like Hermione herself. 'Or maybe,' the voice continued. 'She never stopped being yours...'

"Hey, mate." Harry looked up, startled, as Ron dropped into the seat next to him. "How's the studying going?"

Harry merely jerked a shoulder. "Fine."

Ron glanced around. "Where's Hermione?"

Harry pointed towards aisle nine. "She's there," he said. "Talking to Ernie Macmillan."

"Macmillan?" Ron repeated incredulously. "Guy's about as interesting as a piece of burned toast. What's she talking to him for?"

"Apparently," Harry said in a clipped tone. "Macmillan's been waiting for the moment I was out of picture..."

Ron's eyebrows shot up. "Macmillan? Ernie Macmillan? Fancies Hermione?"

Harry's scowl increased. "Yeah. Apparently."

"And she's... she's actually talking to him?"

Harry nodded.

"What?" Ron exploded.

"Well," Harry mumbled, staring at his hands. "I sort of threatened to beat him up..."

"Good... good," Ron said, eyes narrowing. "Too bad you didn't go through with it.... You know, I never liked him, anyway. Bloody Hufflepuffs."

"She's been there an awfully long time..." Harry said, feeling his stomach turn over.

Ron shot the bookshelves an uneasy look. "I'm sure it's fine," he said. "I mean, Hermione doesn't fancy Macmillan..." Ron paused. "Right?"

"Yeah," Harry said quickly. "Yeah. Right."

"What if she does?"

"What if she does what?" Harry repeated.

Ron gestured towards aisle nine. "Fancy him! I mean, he can go on about... all that knowledge crap with her..."

"No, no way," Harry protested, beginning to feel worried. "Hermione's not like that..." Harry thought for a moment. "He's not... interesting enough for her."

"Yeah, yeah," Ron said quickly. "Of course."

The two lapsed into silence, looking at the bookshelf with matching, uneasy faces.

"What if she does?" Harry asked, after a moment.

"What if she does what?"

"Fancy him!" Harry cried. "Maybe, I dunno... she's ready to move on..."

"Don't be stupid, Harry. She doesn't fancy Ernie Macmillan."

"Right," Harry said, taking a breath. "Right. Of course not."

They shared an uneasy look.

"What if she—"

"Ron!"

"Sorry."

They lapsed back into silence before looking uneasily back towards the bookshelves again.

"Hey, Harry?"

Harry glanced over at his best friend. "Yeah?" he said uncertainly.

"I, uh..." Ron blushed to the tips of his ears, and glanced around the library. He leaned closer to Harry and dropped his voice. "Luna was following me around for a while after practice. I almost couldn't get rid of her..."

"Uh huh," Harry responded automatically, eyes returning to the bookshelf where Hermione and Ernie were talking.

"And, well... do you think that... it's, well, a little bit... creepy?"

"Creepy?" Harry repeated, feeling bewildered.

Ron looked abashed. "Well, she's sort of... I don't want to say stalker, but she's, well, it's... why are you laughing?"

"Sorry..." Harry said, grinning. "She's not stalking you, Ron."

"I dunno, Harry," Ron said, looking around again and dropping his voice further. "She's everywhere, Harry. I came out of the loos the other day... and there she was! Wanted to make sure I hadn't fallen in!"

Harry's grin widened. "Really? That's sweet. She was looking out for you."

Ron scowled. "It's not funny. I don't know what I'm going to do... she's completely stark raving mad..."

"She's just..." Harry thought for a moment. "She's letting you know she cares."

Ron snorted. "Interesting way of showing it."

Harry shrugged. "She's doing her best, Ron," he said quietly.

"I s'pose," Ron admitted grudgingly. "Hermione still talking to that git?"

Harry glanced up before sighing. "Yeah."

"I'm sure it's nothing."

"Yeah."

"C'mon, Harry. We both know that Hermione..." Ron paused and struggled with himself. "That Hermione's still hung up on you..."

Harry suddenly found himself very interested in the tabletop. "You really think so?"

"Yeah," Ron said, voice sounding a little hoarse. "Yeah... I think. I mean, it's possible that she's moved on..."

"Possible?" Harry croaked.

Ron shrugged. "Ernie is a rather handsome bloke... if you're a girl, that is," he added quickly. "He's a prefect, I suppose. He's second in our year, right behind Hermione herself..."

Harry swallowed. "Thanks, Ron."

"No idea," Ron said quickly. "No idea what Hermione could possibly see in him."

Harry slumped. "Ron? Shut up, okay?"

"Yeah," Ron said, blushing a little. "Sorry. Wanker."

"Hey!"

"Not you!" Ron snapped, gesturing towards the bookshelves. "Bloody, stupid Macmillan!"

"Oh. Well... that's okay, then."

"Bloody, annoying... Hermione!" Ron nearly slipped out of his chair. "You're not—how are you?"

Harry's head snapped up, eyes focusing on the girl that was standing by Ron's elbow. "Hermione," he managed. "You're, uh... you're... where's Ernie?"

Hermione settled into the seat next to Ron and passed Harry the book about elemental charms. "Well, if you must know, he went back to the Hufflepuff common room."

"Oh," Harry said. "Told him off, then?"

"Honestly, Hermione," Ron piped up. "Ernie's about as dull as Professor Binns. You can do better."

"Ron, currently, you haven't liked anyone who's taken any interest in me!"

Ron flushed. "I liked Harry!"

"No, you didn't," Harry and Hermione retorted at the same time. They glanced at each other, before looking helplessly away. "Not at the time, anyway," Harry added.

Ron folded his arms over his chest. "Did, too..." he muttered to himself.

Harry turned his attention back to Hermione. "Why were you talking to him for so long?"

Hermione glanced at each of them in turn before sighing. "That's not really your business, is it, Harry?"

Harry blinked at her. "No, I guess not," he muttered, opening the book. "Thanks for the book, Hermione."

"Oh, Harry, don't get like that..."

"Get like what?" he snapped, shutting the book.

"Look like I just plotted to murder Hedwig!"

"Well, you may as well have," Harry said quietly. "Since I'm not sure that would have been any more painful."

"Well!" Ron said loudly, standing and looking uncomfortable. "I'm off! Book calling my name! See you two later!"

Hermione looked stricken. "Oh... I suppose that was rather tactless of me, wasn't it?"

Harry blinked at her. "Yes," he said shortly.

"Harry... this is just so..." she let out a breath. "Complicated."

"I know."

Hermione looked down at her hands. "We were talking for so long because... well, I had to convince him not to tell a professor on you..."

"You... really?"

She nodded. "He's right frightened of you, I think. He refused to get within five feet of me."

Harry grinned. "HA! I knew I intimidated him... stupid, spineless bas—"

"Anyway," Hermione interrupted sharply. "I promised to go to Hogsmeade with him next weekend and he promised not to tell Professor Snape you tried to attack him."

"You WHAT?"

Hermione looked up at him, eyes twinkling a little. "Kidding," she said easily.

"That wasn't funny," Harry snapped, fiddling with the book again.

"Sorry," Hermione apologized, not looking very sorry at all. "It was rather mean of me, wasn't it?"

Harry just shrugged, continuing to feign interest in the book. "So... I suppose..." he said slowly. "If you can go to Hogsmeade with Macmillan, I could go to Hogsmeade with..."

"With...?" Hermione prodded, raising her eyebrows.

"With... people..." Harry thought for a moment. "I am the famous one," he muttered. "I would have no trouble finding a date. If I wanted to."

Hermione laughed softly, placing one of her hands over his. Harry stared down at their hands for a moment, feeling the contact reverberating through his system before slowly raising his head to meet her eyes.

"I kind of like it," she said softly. "Your platonic friends idea."

Harry's mouth went dry. "Very platonic friends..." he croaked.

She smiled. "Well—yes. It's workable." She paused for a moment before removing her hand and taking out her parchment of notes. "Go to Hogsmeade with another girl," she said, very quietly. "And I will kill you."

"Your jealousy is noted," Harry said, grinning a little. "And appreciated."

Hermione sniffed delicately. "Open your book to page 134...."

A/N: Chapter 19 is almost ready for public view, I promise. I also promise that the plot (whatever little plot there is, anyway) finally picks up again.

Thanks again for all the lovely feedback. All the encouragement definitely helps spurn me on.

Two days before the Quidditch match against Ravenclaw, McGonagall stopped the trio on their way to breakfast.

"Good news, Potter," she said tersely. "I've just spoken to all your teachers. And while some of them feel that your work hasn't improved..." McGonagall frowned darkly. "Most of them do. I see no reason why you cannot participate in this weekend's match against Ravenclaw. However, you are still on probation... we will be monitoring your level of work very carefully..."

Hermione squealed and flung her arms around Harry. "We did it!" she said excitedly.

Harry breathed her in, holding her tightly. "Well, with you helping me..." Ron coughed. "And Ron, of course... it was only a matter of time before I caught up..."

Hermione didn't let go of him right away and Harry decided that it was just fine with him.

McGonagall clucked her tongue. "Well, please win... I've become used to seeing Gryffindor on the cup."

Hermione beamed and squeezed Harry a little harder. "With Harry playing Seeker, Professor, you don't have to worry."

Harry flushed. Ron snorted and looked at Professor McGonagall. "They're just friends, you see," he explained slowly. "There's nothing but platonic love between them."

Reluctantly, Harry gently pried Hermione's arms off him. "We are just friends..." he said irritably.

Ron snorted, rolling his eyes at McGonagall. "See, they think if they say it enough times it'll come true..."

"Ron!" Hermione said, voice high-pitched. "Sometimes you are just so... tactless!"

McGonagall cleared her throat. "Yes, well... I must be off...." Looking intensely uncomfortable, McGonagall quickly disappeared in the opposite direction.

Harry watched her go, beginning to grin. "I'm going to be playing Quidditch again," he said reverently.

Ron clapped him on the back. "We're going to win again!"

Hermione sighed. "Honestly, Quidditch isn't the only reason to keep up in school, Harry..."

"Not the only one, sure..." Ron said. "The most important one..."

Happily, Ron and Harry continued on to the Great Hall, excitedly planning their upcoming game. Hermione followed behind them, mumbling under her breath.

"Okay," Ron said. "Ravenclaw... no trouble at all... Chang's still Seeker, you could take her no problem..."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Yeah, best not to underestimate her, though..."

Ron scoffed. "She's a terrible Seeker, Harry..."

"I've always thought so!" Hermione grumbled from behind them.

The two boys promptly ignored her.

"Their beaters aren't half bad..." Harry said. "Could give us trouble..."

"Spect they'll aim at your head..."

"I can handle myself. How about their Keeper?"

"Not half-bad. He's not a king of course..." Ron said quickly.

They slid into their usual seats in the Great Hall, Harry and Hermione on one side and Ron directly across from them. Hermione took a long gulp of coffee before turning to Harry, a wistful glint in her eye.

Harry was immediately suspicious. "What?"

"As fascinating as all this Quidditch talk is, I know what I want," Hermione said. "For helping you."

"Yes?" Harry prodded gently, eager to get back to discussing his upcoming game with Ron.

"I want you to show me how to ride your broomstick."

Hermione's declaration made Ron start choking violently. Dean and Seamus both looked over in slight interest. Luna slid in next to Ron, watching him in vague worry as his eyes filled with tears and he busily began gulping down a glass of water.

Harry flushed, suddenly aware that Hermione now had his full attention. "You... erm... what?"

Hermione scowled. "Oh, honestly! Not that broomstick! You're real one!"

Ron choked even harder, water spewing out of his mouth.

Harry felt all the colour drain from his face. "Erm, Hermione, I'm not sure that would be such a good idea..."

"You're Firebolt, Harry!" Hermione exploded. "Broomstick! Flying broomstick!"

Ron looked in dire need of air.

"Oh," Harry answered stupidly. "I suppose that would be okay..."

Ron snickered. "Bit of a disappointment, eh?" he asked, in a choked voice.

Hermione glared at him. "Shut up, Ron."

Harry's mind was frantically trying to process. Hermione wanted him to teach her how to fly. But she already knew how to fly. Plus, now that he thought about it, he didn't think that giving her flying lessons would really do all that much good for their whole 'we're just friends' thing.

"But, Hermione, you already know how to ride a broomstick," Harry protested slowly.

That sent Ron into another fit.

"Yes, but not well," Hermione responded, ignoring Ron. "I was hoping you could give me a proper lesson.... You ride better than anyone I know."

Ron was taking great gasping breaths of air in between chugging downs glasses of water.

The entire conversation was quickly going somewhere that was making Harry entirely too uncomfortable. He was also horrified to note that the direction of his blood flow was going somewhere that was about to be quite embarrassing. Resisting the urge to start cursing aloud, Harry hunkered down near his food, hoping that Hermione would stop talking.

No such luck.

Hermione was looking at Ron in vague disgust when her eyes suddenly glinted mischievously. "Hey, Harry?"

"Yes?" Harry answered, shifting uncomfortably.

"Do you still have that Broomstick Servicing Kit I gave you a few years ago?"

Harry stared at her, panicked. A loud roaring in his head was preventing him from thinking properly. 'Just say no!' something in his mind screeched. 'For the love of Merlin, say NO!'

"Ye—no. No, I don't."

Hermione looked downcast. "I thought it was one of your favourite gifts."

Harry began shifting uncomfortably again. "Well... you know how out of it I am. I probably lost it."

Hermione looked hurt. "You... lost it?" she whispered.

Oh, damn. "Erm, no. Actually, no. Now that I think about it... I still have it."

Hermione's eyes widened innocently. "Oh, well, then... do you think could also show me how to service your broomstick, as well?"

Ron dropped the glass of water he'd been drinking. Seamus paled. Dean gasped. Neville looked confused. Luna stared dreamily off into space.

"Erm..." Harry stuttered, standing up. "I have to... cold shower..."

Harry did the only thing he could under the circumstances. He ran away.

Ron grinned after him. "That was so mean, Hermione. What did he do to deserve that kind of torture?"

"Well, he did rip out my heart, stomp on it a few times and then hand it back in shreds." Hermione looked off into space for a moment, a small smile curling on her lips. "Was rather mean of me, wasn't it? But, for the record, I don't have the faintest idea of what you're talking about." Dismissing him, Hermione opened up her Daily Prophet, completely oblivious to the horrified looks all the Gryffindor boys were shooting her.

"Remind me to never break her heart..." Seamus muttered to Dean.

"Never break her heart," Dean returned in a horrified whisper.

Ron shifted a little closer to Luna, giving Hermione a wide berth as he did so. "She's mental," he said in a strangled voice.

Luna smiled dreamily, blinking her wide eyes several times. "I don't think I'd have a problem riding your broomstick, Ronald..."

Ron swallowed hard. "This is all your fault," he snapped at Hermione. "I hope you're proud."

There was a slight rustle of newspaper as Hermione turned the page. "I don't have the faintest idea of what you're talking about."

"Okay, so hop on, straddle it between your legs and hold it with a two-hand firm grip, only not too tightly..." with a slight curse, Harry trailed off, feeling more than a little bit stupid. For the first time in his life, he felt a wave of dislike for flying, broomsticks, and Quidditch.

Harry was horrified to see that Hermione looked rather amused by the whole thing. She swung her leg over his Firebolt and grinned. "Okay, straddling, gripping... what's next?"

"Right. Give it a good kickoff and let yourself float up in the—"

"You're coming with me, right?"

Harry swallowed with some difficulty. Bad, bad idea. Very bad idea. "Erm, no."

"Why not?"

"You know why not."

She let out a long, annoyed sigh. "Oh, honestly, Harry, if we can't restrain ourselves for one measly little broom ride..."

Harry decided that he hated it when Hermione said 'Oh, honestly...' because it generally meant that she was vastly annoyed with him.

"Besides," she continued, with some frustration. "You said you'd help me learn how to fly properly. You're certainly not going to be much help if you're on the ground and I'm up there."

He did know that. He just really didn't think it was such a good idea for their delicate friendship to be put to test on his broomstick. All horrible sexual metaphors aside, he would be awfully close to her, feeling rather protective if she was indeed terrified, and a flying broomstick ride suddenly sounded like a very romantic thing to be doing.

"Fine," he relented heavily. "Just promise me one thing."

"What?"

"No more of this wanting to ride my broomstick nonsense. I can't take it. I know you want to learn how to ride a broomstick, so just don't mention it again, okay?"

She grinned. "Can I mention servicing your—"

"NO!" he hollered.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Goodness gracious, Harry, it's just an innocent, little joke—"

"Innocent?" he repeated, thunderstruck.

Hermione sighed. "Just get on the broomstick, Harry."

Harry, still grumbling under his breath, climbed on behind her. He sucked in a breath when she leaned back against him. He had no idea where to put his hands. They seemed too large all of a sudden, and too much in the way. Closing his eyes, he wrapped them around her waist, holding her tightly. 'Too close...' his mind warned, 'too close.'

"So?" she asked, voice trembling a little. "What do I do next?"

"Kick off," Harry muttered. "Get us in the air."

"Right," she whispered. "You already told me to do that."

"Then do it," he said gruffly.

She kicked off and Harry felt the familiar wind whip by his face as they soared into the air. She was trembling slightly, and kept glancing downwards. "Concentrate on what you're doing," Harry said softly. "Don't think about how high up you are. Just focus."

She nodded, taking a deep breath. "Focusing..."

Harry allowed her the chance to steer and get accustomed to being in the air. It was the first time he'd been on his Firebolt since Professor McGonagall had kicked him off the team. Though Hermione's movements were jerky, he enjoyed the familiar feeling of weightlessness and soaring.

She took a hard right and the broom jerked sharply. She gasped loudly and looked down. "Oh, no..." she moaned.

Harry held her a little tighter. "It's okay..." he said. "You're doing great."

Wind rushed by their faces, blowing her hair into his face. Her hair smelled sweet, like fresh flowers and baked apples. Harry took a deep breath, trying to concentrate on the fact that he was attempting to teach her how to fly. But it had been so long since he'd been so near her and she was pressed up against him so completely, trembling slightly with fear. She smelled wonderful, and he remembered, with vivid detail, what it was like being with Hermione. Touching Hermione. Kissing Hermione.

Achingly slow, he brushed his hand over her side, trailed it up her back until he could gently push her hair off to the side, exposing the bare skin of her neck. She tensed, but made no other signs that acknowledged his movement.

"The thing with flying," Harry whispered, leaning down until his lips hovered over the skin of her neck. "Is that it's more of a physical

reaction." He pressed his lips to her neck, pressing delicate kisses to her skin until he reached her jaw. She shivered slightly and Harry was sure it had nothing to do with fear. He kept moving, tracing his lips over the curve of her cheek until he reached her ear. "Sometimes it's better to let your senses take control."

He moved to her earlobe, sucking on it gently and scraping her skin with blunt teeth. She let out a low moan. "Oh... Harry..." she said softly.

Her voice sent a jolt to his system. He skimmed his lips behind her ear, his hand sliding over her hip to come to a rest on her stomach. "Thinking too much can be dangerous. Just let your body react...."

She turned her head until her lips met his. Her hand came up to cup his cheek and Harry closed his eyes, losing himself in the kiss. What started off as gentle quickly became more heated and desperate. Though alarm bells were going off in Harry's head, he didn't care, choosing instead to hold her closer and deepen the kiss.

Hermione pulled away, leaving Harry's head reeling and his entire body tingling. She let out a loud shriek. "THE WHOMPING WILLOW!"

Her cry awoke him from his sluggish state and he was horrified to see them careening at full speed straight towards Hogwarts' most famous tree. He could see the tree quivering in delight, sensing their approach.

Harry reached around her and, grabbing the broom firmly with both hands, jerked it up. They arched upwards, avoiding the tree by only inches. The tree swung one of its gigantic branches in their direction, but Harry swerved, and the branch flew harmlessly by them. Once they were clear of the Whomping Willow, Harry stopped his Firebolt and hovered in midair.

Hermione burst into tears.

"You nearly KILLED us!" she wailed. "You said you'd teach me how to RIDE A BROOMSTICK! Not how to DIE ON A BROOMSTICK!"

She was trembling so hard that her teeth were chattering. "It's okay," Harry said, rubbing her arms. He was shaken up himself, an image of his once beloved nimbus two thousand flashing through his mind. "We're okay. Nothing happened."

"You bring me back down to the ground this instant!" she yelled. "Get me off this thing! GET ME OFF!"

"No," Harry said forcefully.

"WHAT???" she hollered.

"No," Harry said again. "I messed up. Generally I'm not so distracted when I'm flying, okay? I know you'd make a great flyer... just give me another chance."

She trembled violently. "I want to STAND on solid ground! LET ME OFF!"

"Just... just trust me," Harry said quietly, urging his Firebolt forward.

"No! NO WAY! I WANT TO LAND!"

"Okay," Harry said innocently, pointing the nose downward. He took off in a fast Quidditch dive, rushing at the ground.

Hermione started shrieking again, yelling various curses that would have made even Ron blush. Harry kept going, watching as the ground roared up to meet them. At the last second, he pulled out of the dive, moving along beside the ground. Before Hermione could get her bearings, he soared off in the air again.

"WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS TO ME?"

"Because," Harry said, as they executed several flawless dips and dives that had Hermione yelling herself hoarse, "I need to show you that I know what I'm doing. And that you're perfectly safe. Just... try it again, will you?"

To Harry's surprise, Hermione burst out laughing. It was somewhat of a hysterical laugh, punctuated by more tears, and shocked gasps, but it was still a laugh.

"Do you know what you're doing?" Hermione asked.

"No," Harry answered, feeling annoyed. "What am I doing?"

"You're forcing me to ride your broomstick."

Harry was beginning to get irritated. "What did I say about broomstick metaphors?" he snapped. "Besides, I would never make you do anything you were uncomfortable with..."

"LIKE RIDE A BROOMSTICK?"

Harry sighed. "You wanted to learn. Just... please... try it again. I promise I'll try and refrain myself from kissing you."

"Fine," she grumped, taking control of the broom again. "What do you want me to do?"

"I just want you to be comfortable," Harry said. "And what I said about the physical thing... it is true. Just let yourself feel the motion of the broom. Don't try and control it—feel it. You can't study how to fly, it's something that has to come naturally and from instinct."

Hermione huffed out a breath. "I know that or I wouldn't have asked you for help."

"Thank you. You're an absolute joy when you're in a bad mood."

"I'm not in a bad mood!"

"Okay," Harry agreed easily. "Now, concentrate..."

Harry was surprised when Hermione shifted closer to him, pressing herself against him until her back molded against his chest. He sucked in a deep breath, reminding himself to take his own advice and concentrate.

"Oh, I wish..." she said, her voice hushed and tinged with sadness. "This would be so romantic if..."

"I know," he whispered, swallowing deeply.

"Harry, you just kissed me," she said softly, in a slightly accusatory tone.

Harry felt a stab of annoyance. "You kissed me!"

"Well, you started it!"

Harry let out a pained sigh. "Fine," he said crossly. "I'm sorry, okay?"

"You're sorry?" she whispered, sounding hurt.

"Not really." He paused. "But we... can't. You know why we can't." Harry glanced around him, realizing that the open air and Hermione's close proximity made him feel freer than anything had in a long time. "Maybe... I dunno... we could just... pretend for a while..."

Hermione didn't make a reply, choosing instead to concentrate on her flying. At some point Harry began to notice that Hermione wasn't actually that terrible of a flyer. She finally stopped trembling and seemed to relax into the pattern. Her motions became more fluid and she eased the broom into easy dips and turns.

Finally, she said, "I think pretending would end up hurting more in the long run."

Harry felt a lump gather in his throat. "Fine," he said hoarsely. "Then nothing happened. We're just friends. And I'm just showing you how to ride my broomstick."

Hermione cracked a tiny smile. "Best friends," she whispered fiercely. "You're my best friend... don't ever forget that."

Harry nodded, feeling miserable. "Yeah."

Hermione executed a mini-dive, before pulling the broom sharply up and cruising through the air. "Hey!" she said. "That wasn't that bad, was it?"

"No," Harry answered, somewhat surprised. "You're... not bad at all, actually. I thought you said you were a terrible flyer."

She shrugged. "I am. I was. I know a bit... Viktor gave me some lessons back in our fourth-year."

Harry felt his chest tighten. "What? What? VIKTOR DID WHAT?"

Hermione sounded faintly annoyed. "Well, flying was sort of his thing. He was paid to fly. Naturally I took that opportunity to attempt to learn a few new things. He's probably the best flyer in the world."

"You said I was the best flyer you knew!" Harry exploded.

Hermione let out a long sigh. "Honestly, Harry, jealousy doesn't look good on you. Who are you, Ron?"

"YOU DIDN'T JUST KISS RON ON MY BROOMSTICK!"

Hermione sighed again. "Well, if you must know," she said crossly. "Viktor and I never kissed when he gave me flying lessons. He was a perfect gentleman."

Harry scowled. "Are you implying I'm not?"

"Harry, don't be stupid."

Harry's scowl increased. Taking control of the broom, he steered it towards the ground. "

Fine. Since Viktor already taught you everything you know about flying..."

"Harry, you're being stupid," Hermione snapped, exasperated.

Harry stopped the broom rather forcefully. "That's IT!" he cried. "GET OFF MY BROOMSTICK!"

Hermione got off, but whirled around to face him. Her face was pink and her eyes were narrowed furiously. "Honestly! What's gotten into you? What does it matter what Viktor taught me about flying? It was YEARS ago! Besides, like I said, we never KISSED while we were flying—"

"SURE!" Harry yelled. "Because he was too much of GENTLEMAN! I know, Hermione! Viktor's absolutely perfect. Viktor taught you so much more than me. I'm just a horrible teacher...."

Hermione looked furious. "Harry... you're so STUPID!"

"I KNOW!" he hollered. "YOU'VE BEEN TELLING ME SO!"

"I never wanted to kiss Viktor when we were flying," she replied scathingly. "You're the ONLY person I've ever kissed. Don't you UNDERSTAND that?"

Then, Harry wasn't really sure how it happened, but he wasn't on his Firebolt anymore. No, he wasn't. He was in the grass, flat on his back, Hermione firmly on his chest, and kissing the living daylights out of him. The kiss was none too gentle either. Her hands were fisting though his hair, tugging a little bit harder than was necessary. Her teeth nipped at his bottom lip to the point of pain.

She pulled away from him with a sudden gasp, staring down at him in anger. "YOU'RE SO STUPID!" she shouted again.

"Okay..." Harry said, trying frantically to get his bearings. "Fine... I'm stupid..."

She scrambled off him and stood over him, her breath coming out in short gasps. "This isn't right," she said.

Harry closed his eyes, feeling blades of grass tickling the back of his neck. "It feels right. Kissing you feels like—"

"I know," she said, her voice breaking. "It's just that... we're not together like that anymore. And we can't do this if we're not. It's not... it's not right."

Harry opened his eyes to find her staring down at him, her eyes full of tears. He swallowed stiffly, feeling familiar pain settle on his chest. Ironically, the only thing he could think to say was, "I don't think I'm jealous of Viktor Krum anymore. Even if you think he's a better flyer than me."

Hermione let out a tiny bark of hysterical laughter. "I don't think he's a better flyer than you, Harry."

"Well, good," Harry grumped. "Because he's not."

Hermione just shook his head. "Yeah, and you're not jealous anymore, either."

"No, I'm not," Harry snapped.

Hermione blinked back her tears and chuckled softly. The fight seemed to go out of her and she sat down next to him, her arm brushing up against his. "The famous Harry Potter. Jealous of some Quidditch player."

"He's not just 'some Quidditch player,'" Harry answered irritably. "He's a brilliant Quidditch player."

Hermione just shrugged. "I don't know. I can't tell what separates a good player from a brilliant player. You all just go zooming around up there, chasing after goodness knows what."

"Goodness knows what?" Harry repeated, horrified.

"Well, there is the Snitch and all that," Hermione reflected. "But it does seem rather silly, doesn't it? It's just a tiny ball, really..."

"A TINY BALL?" Harry asked, aghast.

Hermione grinned impishly. "I'm sure it's not indicative of anything, of course..."

"Hermione!"

She chuckled and shook her head. "I guess... I just wanted to understand what it was about flying that you were so taken with." She paused. "I think I get it now. When you're up there... you can pretend that nothing else matters, that you're the only person in the world. It's... powerful."

"It's not just the power," Harry said quietly. "It's the freedom. It's like... when I'm up there... I can just be. I can be normal... I can do things I normally wouldn't..."

Their eyes locked. "Like..." Hermione whispered. "Kiss your very platonic best friend?"

"Something like that, yeah..."

"Harry, what—"

"I don't know," he interrupted tersely. "Don't ask me what's going on between us because I don't know what to tell you." He looked away from her. "Nothing's changed. All the reasons I broke up with you... they're still there, Hermione."

Hermione let out a little choked sob and stood up. "I know!" she snapped angrily. "We've been through this! You ripped both our hearts out over this! You're still ripping our hearts out over this! I just wish that... oh, I suppose it doesn't matter..."

Harry looked up at her. "What?" he demanded. "WHAT?"

She glared at him. "I just wish that you would stop thinking about yourself for a minute."

Harry kicked at the grass. "What do you think I'm doing?" he cried. "If I was just thinking about myself, we would still be together! I've been doing everything for YOU!"

"No, you're not," Hermione said, though not unkindly. "You think you are but you're not."

Harry stared at her. "You're not making any sense. Hermione, I'm not girl. Stop being so ambiguous and just TELL ME WHAT YOU MEAN!"

"You know what?" she yelled. "Forget it. When you think you can act like an adult, come and find me. Thanks for the flying lesson."

Hermione turned on her heel and stalked away.

Harry watched her go, a confused look on his face. Angrily, he gathered up his broom and flung it over his shoulder. He stomped back to the castle, feeling furious with Hermione. Well, she should have known. She was the brightest witch in their year. Taking a bloody broomstick ride was not smart. In fact, as she had made quite a point of saying, it was downright stupid. He hadn't been that close to her in nearly two months! What had she expected him to do? Just sit there and pretend that being near her didn't drive him crazy... or that he didn't miss her terribly...

Harry was so angry that he was panting when he reached the Fat Lady. "Podfungus," he snapped at her.

"Well, you're in a fine mood," she said huffily, swinging open to let him pass.

Harry flushed and stalked through the entrance. He was so distracted that he collided right into someone coming out of Gryffindor tower.

"Ouch!" Harry yelled, making a beeline for his broomstick.

There was a responding, "Argh!" followed by low, sheepish tones. "Harry?"

"Ron?"

"Yeah... how are you? Gotta go... urgent homework that needs attention... you know how it is..."

"Yeah. Me, too. I have to do, well, you know... see you later...."

Nodding briskly, they brushed by each other. Harry was depositing his broom when something sunk in. He dropped his Firebolt (something he'd never done before) and raced out of the room. The Fat Lady looked decidedly unhappy about having to open for him again.

Ron met him in the hall, wearing a matching expression.

"YOU!" they yelled at the same time.

They both took a nervous step backwards, watching each other suspiciously. Finally, Harry swallowed and held up a hand. "You have lipstick on your mouth," he said quietly.

"Oh, yeah?" Ron said hotly. "So do you!"

Harry blinked, and smoothed a hand over his mouth. He winced, his bottom lip stung painfully and he wondered, yet again, when Hermione had started wearing lipstick.

"It's still there," Ron said irritably.

"Well, fine!" Harry said. "Yours is, too."

Ron scowled. "What's it to you, anyway?"

Harry just stared at him. "Well, who was it?"

"Luna," Ron answered stiffly.

Harry's eyes bugged. "You kissed Luna?"

Ron flushed. "No, actually," he said with some dignity. "She kissed me."

"Right. And I suppose you immediately pushed her away..."

"Not... not exactly..."

"Huh," Harry answered, eyes glinting.

Ron blushed. "Well, so what?" he asked loudly. "I can't very well wait around for Hermione to notice me for the rest of my life!"

"Well," Harry prodded. "Does that mean you're over her?"

"Luna?"

"HERMIONE!"

Ron blinked and thought it over. "Dunno."

"How can you NOT know?" Harry demanded. "You kissed Luna! That should make things fairly clear!"

"She kissed me!" Ron repeated again. "Besides, Harry, it's not like I can magically just stop liking someone! You should know that better than anyone!"

"Do you still fancy Hermione?" Harry pressed.

"Maybe," Ron grit out. "I just told you, I don't know!"

"But you fancy Luna."

"Yes. I think so..."

"RON!"

"I mean," Ron added hastily. "I think... I'm sure, I'd let her snog me again."

"What are you going to do?"

Ron shrugged. "Dunno."

Harry stared at him for a moment, before breaking into a hysterical fit of laughter. "Ron..." he gasped. "We're so useless."

Ron glared at him. "What are you going on about?"

Harry laughed harder. "We try so hard... but we're so lost. Honestly, if we didn't have Hermione telling us how we were feeling... we'd be so confused...."

Ron grinned. "I guess..."

"We think we're doing the right thing, but half the time we don't even know what we're feeling... much less what anyone else is feeling..."

Ron's expression suddenly went from amused to miserable. "Harry, that's not funny," he said seriously. "That's depressing."

Harry slumped. "Yeah... it is..."

They lapsed into a miserable silence, staring at the ground and shuffling their feet. Finally, Ron glanced over at Harry, as if suddenly remembering something. "How's the 'just friends' thing going with Hermione?"

Harry merely glared in response.

"Good, then," Ron said quickly. A sudden thought struck him, and he took two menacing steps towards Harry. "It was Hermione... because if it wasn't..."

"Of course it was Hermione, you moron!" Harry cut in angrily. "Who the bloody else would I go around kissing?"

"Cho Chang?"

"RON!" Harry yelled, the last couple of hours finally catching up to him. "Can't you for once try to be... I dunno... a little more sensitive? Why would I be kissing Cho Chang?"

Ron nodded, calmly accepting Harry's angry tirade. "C'mon," he said knowingly. "We need to go back to the common room."

Without waiting for a response, Ron turned around and started back towards the portrait hole. Harry, after considering his friend's retreating back, shuffled to catch up to him.

"What are we doing?" Harry demanded testily, feeling more than a little frustrated.

Ron ignored him. "Podfungus," he said to the Fat Lady.

The Fat Lady glared at them. "You two again, is it? I suppose you think that's all I'm good for... opening doors all day long... I have a life of my own, I'll have you know... I can't just cater to the petty whims of two boys..."

"Just let us in!" Harry hollered.

Muttering to herself, the Fat Lady swung open and Harry and Ron clambered inside. Upon reaching the common room, Ron led Harry over to a chair and pointed at it with his wand.

"Sit," he commanded imperiously.

Harry sat, beginning to feel more bewildered than angry. "Ron... what's... what are you doing?"

Ron paced back and forth in front of him, hands clasped behind his back. "I," he said after a long pause. "Am going to help you sort out your feelings."

Harry paled. "You're going to... what?"

"You heard me," Ron said continuing to pace. "You and me are going to have a nice long chat about your feelings."

"But... why?"

Ron stopped and stared down at him. "Because, Merlin knows, someone's got to... and since it isn't likely to be Hermione, it may as well be me."

"Ron..." Harry said faintly. "I don't know if this is such a good idea."

Ron looked sternly down at him. "This is going to be painful, Harry. On both of us. But I think that if we act mature enough, and if you're completely honest with me, we can come out of it relatively unscathed."

"Ron," he said nervously. "We're boys. We're not supposed to talk about our feelings. It just isn't done."

Ron's mouth tightened into a thin line. He looked resolute. "Clearly you can't talk to Hermione about this stuff. So it's going to have to be me."

Feeling faint, Harry continued to stare in disbelief. "Feelings... you want me to talk about my feelings? To you?"

Ron looked a little offended. "Yeah, I bloody well do want you talk to me!" Ron resumed his pacing. "So. What just happened? How do you feel about it? How do you think Hermione feels about it?"

Harry swallowed. "Ron, I'm really not sure this is a—"

"I DON'T CARE!" Ron hollered, pointing his wand ominously in Harry's direction. "I've had it up to here with the pair of you!" Ron gestured to a point above his head. "This, 'Oh, we're just friends, though we shoot each other agonizing looks and cry ourselves to sleep at night and secretly want to go off to a closet and shag! Oh, woe is me! Oh, it's so hard being Harry Bloody Potter, I must deny myself every shred of happiness, and stoically persevere! Oh, life is so tough! Oh, my scar is throbbing! Oh, I must cut myself off to save everyone I love! OH, I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE!'"

Harry's jaw dropped and he stared at his friend soundlessly. Finally, finding his voice, he managed, "I do not cry myself to sleep at night..."

Ron waved his wand angrily in Harry's direction again. "So let's hear it, Potter!" Ron started pacing back and forth, scowling when Harry didn't make a sound. "TALK!" he finally screeched.

Completely stunned, Harry was only vaguely aware that his mouth had started moving. Before he knew it, the entire story came pouring out of him. The difficult three weeks he'd spent pretending to be Hermione's friend, the flying lesson, their impromptu snog, his jealousy and Hermione's anger. He grew more comfortable as he talked, relaxing as he realized that finally he had someone he could talk to, finally someone would give him some advice. As Harry wound down the story, Ron stopped his pacing and stared at him with wide-eyes.

"So let me get this straight," Ron said, beginning to snicker. "You and Hermione started snogging while you were teaching her how to ride your broomstick?"

Harry glared at him and started to stand up. "Well, fine, if you're going to laugh at what I'm saying..."

"I wasn't laughing!" Ron gasped. "It's just..."

"Ron, GROW UP!" Harry yelled.

Ron let out another tiny snicker before sobering. "Okay—just one more thing."

Harry sat back down, continuing to glare at the redhead. "Yeah? What?"

"She kissed you again?" Ron asked, looking incredulous. "Even though she was right pissed at you?"

Harry absentmindedly rubbed a hand over his mouth. "Yeah. I dunno."

Ron shook his head. "Girls... they're so..."

"I know..."

"Never know what's going on..."

"Completely different messages..."

Ron shook his head, as if reminding himself to focus. "So, Harry..." he said slowly. "The real question is... how does all of this make you feel?"

Harry stared at him.

"Angry? Sad? Confused? Happy? Horny?"

"Ron!"

"Sorry," he muttered. "I'm trying to help."

Harry sighed. "I don't know," he muttered looking at his hands. "I'm angry, furious... but not really with Hermione." He thought for a moment, frowning darkly. "I wish I could be angry with her, it'd make things easier. Thing is, I'm mostly angry with myself."

"Harry..." Ron said hesitantly. "I don't want to ask, but... you still love her, don't you?"

"Yes," Harry whispered. "I can't... stop. I tried."

"Go on," Ron prodded gently.

Harry shifted and stared down at his hands. "Just so you know, talking to you about this stuff is really... weird."

"Harry," Ron said in a patronizing kind of voice. "Talking about this stuff at all is weird."

"I s'pose," Harry muttered.

"So?" Ron prodded again.

Harry nodded miserably. "So much of it has to do with Sirius..." Harry stared off into space, his godfather's name evoking a familiar throbbing pain. He cleared his throat. "Last summer, I vowed I'd never let it happen again. I promised myself I'd do anything to stop Voldemort from going after the people I loved. It's not fair," Harry said softly. "That so many people have died because of me."

"Harry..."

"Don't," Harry said sharply. "I'm just being honest, okay? I'm not saying it was my fault, but it was because of me. Sirius would still be alive if it wasn't for me."

"Yeah," Ron said angrily. "Yeah, right, he could be living in some hell world where You-Know-Who had taken over! Did you ever think of that, Harry? How many people are alive because of you? Hermione's muggle born, you great big prat. Where the fuck do you think she would be if it wasn't for you?"

"But that doesn't change anything!" Harry yelled. "Voldemort is alive! And Hermione's in more danger than ever because I went and fell in love with her! And that's not even the half of it!" Desperate to make Ron understand, Harry stood, looking him in the eye. "Ron, if Voldemort killed you... that'd be it for him. That's the stupidest thing he could do. And he knows it. He knows that I wouldn't stop until he'd paid for it."

Ron actually looked a little choked up. "Thanks, Harry..." he said hoarsely. "That was..."

"I'm not done!" Harry said irritably. "If it was Hermione..." he trailed off, the mere thought making him feel faint. "If it was Hermione, I'm not sure if I could ever... I think it'd destroy me, Ron."

Looking a little faint himself, Ron sunk into Harry's abandoned chair. "Merlin..." Ron breathed. "No wonder you've been so high-strung lately... carrying all of that around inside..."

"That's why!" Harry said, gesturing wildly. "That's why I have to cut myself off from her... that's why I have to—"

"Hold on!" Ron interrupted loudly. "I never said anything about cutting yourself off!"

Harry clenched his jaw. "You're right. I should try one of those spells to erase my feelings—"

"Will you just shut up for one bleeding minute so I can think?" Ron took a deep breath before letting it out slowly. "Listen, I'm going to give you some advice now, and you probably won't like it much."

Harry looked at the floor. Suddenly feeling exhausted, he only shrugged.

Ron fiddled with his wand as he sorted through his thoughts. "I think Hermione's right," he said suddenly. "You're being awfully self-centered about this whole thing."

"What?" Harry sputtered. "I thought you were on my side..."

"Think about Hermione for one second, will you?" Ron snapped. "Here you are, going on and on about how losing her will kill you, how you can't let her fall to Voldemort, blah, blah, drama and angst, blah, blah, but you've conveniently forgotten that there's a prophecy predicting your death. I mean, here you are, going on about how losing Hermione would be the death of you, when you're loads more likely to kick the bucket than she is!"

"Ron—"

"And I'm not kidding, either!" Ron yelled, face beginning to turn red. "Can you just put yourself in her place for one moment? I know it might be insensitive of me, Harry, but how can you talk about her dying when it's you that has the bloody prophecy?" Ron's voice softened. "I'm just saying, you're not the only one who has to deal with the idea of losing people you love..."

Harry swallowed. "I never... thought about that..."

"No," Ron said. "You haven't. You've just been thinking about yourself. Granted, considering what you have to deal with, it isn't something that I'm holding against you. Has Hermione said it yet?" Ron continued. "That she loves you?"

Harry stared at him, feeling himself grow cold. "No... not exactly..." he mumbled.

Ron nodded. "She probably doesn't want to admit it."

"Admit what?" Harry asked sharply.

"That she loves you."

Harry brooded over that quietly for a moment, his eyes darkening. Finally, rubbing his eyes, he shrugged. "Well, it just goes to show," he said hollowly. "Things aren't meant to be..."

"I didn't say that."

"Do you think she does?" Harry demanded suddenly, a note of desperation in his voice.

"Love you? Probably. I think she has for ages."

Harry stared very hard at his hands. "I don't know what to do."

"Well, that's obvious," Ron muttered. "How about this? Have you tried talking to Hermione?"

Harry jerked a shoulder. "Sort of."

Ron snorted. "Okay, how about asking her about how she feels?"

"Ron—I think I just need to be alone for a while. Sort things out." Harry paused. "But... thank you."

"Your welcome." Ron cleared his throat. "Actually... I've been... thinking about things recently..."

"Really?" Harry said, feigning surprise. "Did it hurt?"

"Haha, bloody hilarious..." Ron shifted uncomfortably. "It's about something Dumbledore said a while back. He told me that I was a prat to be jealous of you, 'cause I was the one who had everything. Everything that was important, anyway. 'Course, took me a good long while to figure that out. But seeing everything that you have to go through..." Ron looked at him helplessly for a moment. "I don't envy you, Harry."

"Yeah, well... neither do I..." Harry said heavily.

"You need her," Ron said softly. "You need her more than you need anyone else—more than you need me. Yeah, that might make you vulnerable, but..." Ron trailed off and regarded Harry seriously. "What would you be without her?"

Harry didn't answer, choosing instead to study the floor with deep concentration.

"Anyway," Ron cleared his throat. "I think you should know... I'm pretty sure that... I wouldn't want to stand in the way of what you two share. Besides," Ron continued, smiling brightly. "It's my two best friends who are 'just friends'! I should be happy for you two! However... if you ever hurt her... more than you are already... then I will be forced to kill you. Preferably with a sharp instrument."

Harry felt a lump gather in his throat. "Thanks, Ron..."

Ron looked startled. "Harry," he said warningly. "You're getting sniffly... don't you dare..."

Harry blinked rapidly and turned his head to the side. "I've just got something in my eye..."

Ron's eyes widened. "DON'T CRY!"

"It's gone," Harry said quickly. "I'm just going to go up to the dorms now..."

"Good idea."

Harry stared at him awkwardly for a second. Ron stared back.

"I'm not hugging you," Ron finally said, slightly suspicious.

Harry shook his head. "Right. No hugging."

Ron heaved a great sigh and stuck out his hand, coughing slightly. Harry, after a moment's pause, shook Ron's hand.

"Well..." Harry said, clearing his throat.

Ron shifted back and forth. "Well..."

"I'll just be going..."

"Yeah..."

"See you later..."

"Later..."

Avoiding eye contact, the two boys parted and Harry headed up to his dormitory, pondering everything Ron had said. He flopped down on his bed, pulling his pillow over his head. Grudgingly, Harry admitted to himself that Ron was right. He did have to talk to Hermione about how she was feeling. He wasn't sure what, if anything, that would accomplish, but he owed her that much, at least, after everything they'd been through.

To everyone that's read and reviewed: thank you so much for your comments. Sorry that this update took so long. I'm honestly trying to get these out as fast as I can. I'm planning on working on the next chapter this weekend to have out sometime next week.

The last thing that Harry wanted to do was go down to dinner. Hermione would be there and he would probably be obligated to sit next to her. Then he'd have to make conversation, all the while skirting their real issues and pretending that things were fine. The entire thing was making his head hurt, and if he hadn't been so hungry he probably would have skipped it.

However, he was hungry, and some part of him realized that maybe Ron had been right. The realization came as somewhat of a shock (Ron was right!), and he thought that perhaps talking to Hermione about her feelings really would be the sensitive thing to do (Ron was right!). So with a growling stomach and some trepidation, he made his way down to the Great Hall.

He vaguely considered sitting next to Ron instead of Hermione, but switched tactics immediately when he saw Luna sitting at Ron's elbow. Heart beginning to thump wildly in his chest, Harry hesitantly slid in next to Hermione.

"Hey," he said, in what he hoped was a light, casual tone.

She barely looked up at him. "Hello," she greeted, rather coolly.

Harry swallowed nervously and searched his brain for something to say.

"So, um, what's for dinner?"

Hermione frowned lightly. "Use your eyes, Harry."

Harry swallowed again.

"Hermione..." he began, not really sure what he going to say.

She froze, a fork of food halfway between her plate and her mouth. "Yes?" she asked softly.

This separation thing is ridiculous, it doesn't matter how many times I say we're just friends...it'll never be true.

Harry shook his head. "Nothing," he answered quickly. "Never mind."

She sighed painfully and continued eating.

Harry shifted his attention to Luna and Ron, eager to do anything but stare miserably at Hermione.

"Oh, yes, it's quite true," Luna was saying breathlessly. "Full moon makes people do all kinds of things they wouldn't normally..."

"Really?" Ron said eagerly, leaning towards her. "Like snogging?"

Luna giggled. "You know, Ronald, it's a very beautiful night outside."

Ron glanced at the ceiling. "Erm, it's raining, Loonie..." Ron paused and turned purple. "I mean... Luna. How are you? Beautiful night did you say?"

She blinked her eyes dreamily at him. "Oh, I don't mind it when you call me Loonie."

Ron's eyes widened. "Loonie's a lovely name..." he said, in a strangled voice.

Luna looked at the ceiling of the Great Hall and hummed to herself. "The stars are aching to get out... pushing the rain far away... far, far away...." She blushed suddenly, looking a little embarrassed. "Perhaps you'd like to go for a walk with me later."

Ron flushed. "A walk?"

Luna's blush, if anything, actually increased. "I can practice singing 'Weasley is My King' in preparation for your match tomorrow."

"That's all?" Ron asked, a disappointed note to his voice.

"Well, no," Luna said, with a slight frown. "It will be a full moon, you know."

"Will it?"

Harry, deciding that Ron clearly needed some help, kicked him rather forcefully under the table.

Ron yelped and glared at him. "Oi! What did you do that for, Harry?"

"A walk," he hissed. "Under the full moon. Makes people do weird thing..."

Ron still continued to look rather confused and Harry groaned, turning to Hermione for help.

She was looking at Ron with a speculative look on her face. "Perhaps they will go on their walk," she said lightly. "Perhaps it really will clear up and the moon will come up. Maybe they'll start kissing, they won't really know what they're doing, only that it feels right. Next thing you know, Ron will tell her how much he loves her—"

Ron gasped and made a choking voice. "Hermione, what are you—"

"But break up with her at the same time," Hermione continued loudly, ignoring Ron's glare. "Then the pain comes next. Oh, yes, the pain. Suddenly breathing hurts, doing homework hurts, sleep is like torture. You decide to be friends. That works out just brilliantly. Friends—it's simple and rather easy, you've been friends for nearly 6 years, after all. Then things start heating up again..."

Harry did the only thing he could, given the circumstances. He whimpered. Loudly. Hermione, thankfully, seemed to finally notice what she'd been saying. She quickly began eating again, turning an interesting shade of red.

Ron was staring at Hermione in mild panic, breathing heavily. "Are you still talking about me?"

Luna was blinking away tears. "Ronald," she said heavily. "You're breaking up with me?"

"Wha... what? What? No... I..." Ron trailed off, blushing furiously. "When was there anything to break up from?"

Harry shrank down into his seat and coughed lightly. "Err," he tried. "Perhaps we're getting slightly ahead of ourselves..."

Luna sniffled loudly. "Ronald... after everything..."

Ron started gulping down a glass of water. "Really... Luna... I think Hermione was confused..."

Harry shrank down even further.

Finally, he said in a whisper, "Hermione, I think that we should talk."

"Do you?" she asked coldly, not looking at him.

"I think that..." he said carefully. "I think that I haven't been fair to you. I don't think I've paid enough consideration to your feelings. I, err... I'd really like to know how you feel about... everything," he finished weakly.

Hermione sniffled loudly, but still didn't turn to look at him. "Oh, Harry," she whispered. "I didn't think you'd ever ask."

'Thank you, Ron,' Harry thought. Feeling decidedly happier, Harry sat up a little straighter and began eating again. That was when it started, something he'd jokingly refer to later as: 'After I started the shepherd's pie, but before I'd started on the salad.'

His scar prickled ever so lightly. Harry, who was used to feeling light pain in his scar, promptly ignored it. Due to Occlumency, he and Dumbledore had managed to get to a point where the old pain dulled to a slight warning. For the most part, he'd stopped sharing dreams with Voldemort. However, Dumbledore warned that the connection

was still there. Harry had to be aware that Voldemort would no doubt attempt to utilize it again in the future.

Harry continued to munch, starting on his salad. The pain increased and Harry let out a startled gasp. Heads turned in his direction and Harry grit his teeth until the pain passed. Head throbbing ever so slightly, Harry was relieved when the pain in his scar disappeared. He continued on his salad, hoping that would be the extent of it.

The pain seared to life. It was a pain that Harry had only felt once before. He felt the pain burst alive on his forehead and he grasped at it, letting out a hoarse scream as he did so. His scar felt on fire, ripping and bursting his forehead in two. Moaning and screaming, he fell to the floor, grasping at his head.

His body began twitching wildly, the pain spreading into all his limbs and consuming him. Harry couldn't remember anything, he couldn't remember his name, where he was, who he was, he could only feel the pain, the pain consuming him, tearing him...

The pain changed, it became darker, more sinister. Harry felt cold and numb like he had been thrust into the iciest water imaginable. The coldness spread throughout his body and he choked, the pain in his forehead increasing to unimaginable levels. Some level of clear thinking burst through his head and terror spread through his body.

He knew what was coming.

He struggled to fight. The pain was too much, he couldn't think. He tried to hold onto something, he tried to remember everything that Dumbledore had taught him about Occlumency. He yelled himself hoarse, screams of pain and fear.

The coldness continued to spread, the pain in his forehead reaching such a height that for one second he nearly blacked out. The pain subsided somewhat and the coldness developed a firm hold over his body. Abruptly his screams ended, though his forehead was still alive with pain. He tried to blink, he tried to open his mouth, he tried to do something that meant he was still in control...

He was standing up, his mouth was twisting into a feral grin... he was reaching for his wand... his eyes were busily passing over everyone and everything in the room...

Harry wasn't in control any longer. All he could feel was the pain. The pain and the blackness, the cold that swept through his entire form until he wasn't sure where it ended and he began...

He was speaking now, but it wasn't his voice. It was a horrible imitation of his voice, low and hissing. "Don't move Dumbledore..."

His wand was out... and he was filled with an icy desire to...

Kill...

No! Harry tried to struggle, it was his body, he was in control. He would not let Voldemort use him this way. He would not let Voldemort possess him....

"Stop fighting, Potter," his voice hissed. "It won't do you any good..."

He was shunned to the side again, pain searing to life. Dumbledore had risen at the staff table, Professor McGonagall next to him. Harry felt slight hope rise within him at the sight of Dumbledore, his wand raised and his face grim.

His voice was laughing now. It was a low sound, like a strong hiss.

"Stand down, Dumbledore," he said. "You'll never kill the boy... we both know that..."

Dumbledore's blue eyes clouded over. "Oh?" he said. "Would you like to test that theory.... Voldemort?"

A shocked gasp rippled through the Great Hall. Students stood up, looking panicked and stricken.

"No one moves," his voice said again, his hand twirling his wand. "The first one who does..."

Dumbledore motioned with his hands for students to sit. Cries of fear and terror broke out through the hall.

Harry watched everything as if underwater. He could feel himself moving, he could hear his voice speaking, but he wasn't in control. The pain was so intense... it was so overpowering... he knew he should fight it...

A loud whimper broke the hushed panic of the hall and his body turned ever so slightly, eyes still fixed upon Dumbledore. His mouth twisted into a wider smile.

Hermione was standing and attempting to reach him. She wasn't getting anywhere, as Ron had a firm grip on both her arms, physically holding her back. When Harry turned his eyes on her, she shrieked and took a step backward. Ron put a protective hand on her arm and reached for his wand.

He was laughing again. The laugh filled Harry with terror. Despite the pain, he felt panic seeping in. Not Hermione... Voldemort couldn't take Hermione...

"Is that so, Potter?" his voice hissed out.

He had his wand raised again, it was pointing at Ron and Harry knew what was coming... he could feel it... he wanted to stop it... he wanted to do anything to stop it...

And then Dumbledore was there. His wand was out and he looked furious, his body radiating power.

"You will not take any of my students, Voldemort," Dumbledore said quietly. "I will not allow it."

He was laughing again, twirling his wand. "And if that means sacrificing Potter?"

Dumbledore stared at him. "Harry," he said calmly. "I know you can hear me. I need you to fight him, Harry. You can fight him. You are

strong enough. This is not Voldemort's natural state. It can and will be done."

Harry tried, he struggled... he pushed... he tried to get past the pain... his body went still and he felt a surge of hope... he pressed on...

A new swell of pain overcame him and he let out a short scream. His cry echoed through the hall, his own, but it was cut off...

Voldemort had control again and he was moving forward... he was coming towards Dumbledore.... Harry felt excitement swell up inside him. This was his chance... this was his chance to... to...

Kill. Kill Dumbledore.

Harry wanted to speak, he wanted to tell Dumbledore to just kill him, anything was better than this pain, and anything was better than killing everyone he loved...

"You have failed, Dumbledore," he said, his voice low and mocking. "Harry is gone."

Dumbledore's face betrayed little. "You will not win, Voldemort," he said quietly. "Harry will never stop fighting you."

He paused, pretending to think it over. "Why... I do believe he's giving up.... He's begging for death... begging for you to kill him..."

"No," Hermione whimpered, hand going to her mouth.

Harry felt a surge of triumph pass through him and he was sickened by the realization that it was because Voldemort was enjoying the pain he was causing. He struggled weakly against the hold Voldemort had on his mind, but he felt too tired... there was too much cold... too much pain...

His tongue clucked and he advanced towards Hermione, excitement welling up inside him. Ron shook as he kept a firm hand on Hermione's arm, his eyes bleak and flat as they stared at Harry's form.

"Don't come near her," Ron breathed dangerously. "I'm warning you, if you don't want to piss off Harry... don't come near her..."

"Harry Potter is gone," his voice said, amusement colouring its tones. "We are one... we are the same... he is nothing..."

"Harry... please..." Hermione said brokenly. "Please, Harry... I know you're in there..."

"Stupid girl..." he hissed venomously. "It is only me... Lord Voldemort... and you, Mudblood will soon be dead..."

Terrified cries echoed through the hall. People gripped each other, tears shinned freely in the eyes of the younger students. Only the Slytherins appeared unaffected, their eyes transfixed on Harry and the show playing out before them.

"That's enough, Tom," Dumbledore said, shifting surreptitiously closer to Ron and Hermione. "I will never allow you to harm any of my students, so long as they are under my protection..."

Harry's laugh was gleeful now, the triumph and excitement building up inside him. "And what about Potter? It's them or him... even you must realize that..."

Trembling, Hermione wrenched herself out of Ron's protective grip and came to stand next to Dumbledore. She raised her chin in defiance. "Harry," she said, voice strong. "You must fight him. Fight him, Harry."

At the sound of her voice, Harry tried to renew his struggles, but it was useless. There was too much pain, too much blackness. Voldemort was right... Dumbledore should just kill him...

Harry had his eyes closed, and enjoyment surged through him. "You cannot possible hope to reach him, you silly fool."

Hermione's lip trembled. "Professor..." she whispered. "Please... help him..."

Dumbledore put a hand on her shoulder. "If Harry cannot fight you, Voldemort, I will have no choice."

"No!" Hermione yelled, clear panic in her voice. She pushed herself in front of Dumbledore, making clear her intent to protect Harry at all costs.

Harry's laugh rang through the hall. He had his wand raised... Harry could see it... he could feel Voldemort's anticipation building inside him...

"HERMIONE!" Ron hollered, rushing at her, but Dumbledore held him back.

The pain didn't matter anymore. In that moment, no amount of pain would have stopped Harry from struggling. He only knew, he wouldn't let Voldemort have Hermione... not this way... not ever...

"Avada... NO!"

Miraculously, Harry's own voice, his normal voice, burst out of him. There was a momentary hush, and Harry suddenly found himself in full control again. He looked down, desperate to get his bearings...

Pain seared through him again, and he knew he failed. He knew Voldemort had possessed him again...

Hermione, hope shining in her eyes, took a step closer to him. Ron seemed desperate to get to her, but Dumbledore continued to hold him back.

"Let go of me!" he bellowed, furiously trying to wrench himself free of Dumbledore's grip. "He's going to kill her!"

There were more shocked gasps throughout the hall. First years were crying and trembling with fear. The staff table was on their feet, their wands out and pointed towards Harry.

"Just say the words, Albus," McGonagall said, in a harsh whisper.

Dumbledore just shook his head, his entire focus on Hermione. "Not yet... not yet..."

Hermione continued to approach him cautiously. Harry felt panic well inside him. Voldemort waited patiently, waiting for Hermione to creep closer... he had his wand out again... his hand twitched with eagerness...

She stopped directly in front of him, her eyes glistening.

"Avada..." Harry fought again, struggling for control, adamant that Voldemort would not succeed. Voldemort had taken his parents, he'd taken Sirius, but he would not take Hermione. His hand began to shake with the effort. "Avada... Avada..."

Hermione placed a hand on his chest, over his heart. Voldemort was so shocked by the contact that he jerked backwards. Harry used his distraction to fight harder... to keep pushing... he could feel the pain ebbing... the cold beginning to recede...

"You listen to me, Harry," she said quietly, coming towards him again. Her hand was on his chest, and his heart leaped because he could feel it, he could feel her. Voldemort's hold on him was weakening.

"Avada ..." his voice said again, choking on the words, as Harry fought to re-surface. "Avada ..."

Hermione smiled and she shook her head. "You won't win, Voldemort," she said icily, moving even closer to him until she could look him in the eye. "Now listen, Harry," she whispered. "I need you to fight him. I love you, do you hear me? So you have to fight him. You have to because I can't lose you. I love you."

Warmth shot through Harry's body. It pushed away the cold and the pain. Her words echoed through his mind as the warmth tingled through him. He pushed Voldemort away. He kept pushing, pushing, pushing... Voldemort had not won... Harry had beaten him... Hermione loved him... Hermione loved him...

He held on to that thought desperately, clinging to it. Hermione loved him and he loved her and nothing else mattered. He let it fill him and he heard Voldemort yelling in his head. Voldemort was in pain... he couldn't understand love... he didn't understand Harry's reaction...

With a tremendous burst, Harry forced Voldemort out of his mind, out of his body. He felt Hermione's love well up inside him until he was afraid he would explode from the rush of warmth and feeling. No other words had ever had such a strong effect on him before...

With a start, Harry realized that he was in control. He could hear ragged breathing, he could feel his heart thumping wildly in his chest, and he blinked his eyes rapidly. He glanced down, feeling the breath woosh out of his body as he did so.

He wasn't himself anymore. He tried to process what was happening, who he was... where he was. He spun around, trying to figure out what was happening. The room was dark and damp, the smell of mold and mildew was sharp.

He felt a loud roaring in his head, someone was screaming in pain. He felt it then, the coldness and blackness was filling his stomach again. He felt a hate so powerful it made him choke. He couldn't find a single good feeling... it was worse than being near Dementors... so much worse...

Evil...

It was evil as Harry had never felt before. It was evil in its purest form. It was dark and sinister, the complete opposite of love. It filled him with a despair so deep that he couldn't even remember what Hermione's face looked like... though he did his best to call her up in his mind...

Still he refused to surrender. He knew that this was important, somehow. He knew that he had to hold on a little while longer, just a little while longer. He forced himself to move, to prove that he could overcome the absence of feeling... that he could go on despite the evil welling up inside him... he had to prove that he was stronger than it...

He kept moving, twirling the wand in his hand. Though it was not his own, it felt oddly familiar... comforting...

The screaming in his head was louder. Though it was not his own, though he was no longer in any pain, he could feel it reverberating through his body. The coldness was sinking in... the darkness in him was so powerful... it chilled him to even contemplate it.... It was an evil too deep to comprehend, too deep to live through...

Harry couldn't do it any longer. He couldn't bear it, he tried desperately to hold on to all that made him good all that was pure in his world... Hermione's declaration of love seemed like it happened eons ago... had it really made him feel so good?"

Harry relinquished his hold. He let himself fall, out of the darkness, out of the cold.... He felt warmth beckoning to him and he dove for it, letting himself go....

Blackness enveloped him, oblivion and peace wrapped around him... he fell into it willingly, eagerly...

Harry was very warm. That was his first thought. He was warm. He curled up in a ball, feeling contentment encircle him... he knew, though he could not remember why, that warmth was the best feeling in the world... nothing was better than being warm...

He could hear voices around him. Soft voices, muted and hushed as if coming from underwater. Then he felt Hermione near and he instinctively relaxed. He could feel her hand clutching his, nearly to the point of pain. He desperately wanted to tell her that he was fine... that everything was okay... but he didn't seem to have the energy...

The voices were coming closer. He could make out Dumbledore, his voice radiating anger.

"No, Cornelius, you will not come near him. You will not touch him. You will not remove him. Harry will remain here, at Hogwarts, where he is safest..."

"Dumbledore, really, I believe your fondness for the boy is overshadowing reason! We cannot allow You-Know-Who free access to this school! The wizarding community is in a panic! Parents are demanding that the school be shut down..."

"Voldemort will not be returning."

"For all we know, he could already be here! There is no guarantee that Harry managed to—"

"You, nor anyone from the Ministry will come near the boy," McGonagall cut in sharply. "I believe Albus has made that more than clear."

There was a hint of frustration in Fudge's voice. "Really, this is quite ridiculous! I am not suggesting we imprison Harry... no, no, indeed... only that some form of caution should be taken. I stress, there is no guarantee that when he awakens he will be Harry Potter."

"He will be."

It was Hermione's voice now, quiet and deathly calm. Harry wished that he could open his eyes and assure her that she was right... he was back... but he couldn't seem to move... he could barely listen as it were...

"Yes, yes, that's right, dear," Fudge said in a condescending voice. "And you are... the girlfriend, correct?"

"It does not matter, Cornelius," Dumbledore said, a warning edge to his voice. "Because she is right. Harry will remain here. Harry will remain under Hogwarts' care. I will provide whatever protection is necessary. I will not argue this point farther..."

Feeling somewhat reassured, though somewhat confused as to what was happening, Harry allowed himself to be lulled into oblivion again... slipping out of the world... and down into a cocoon of warmth and safety...

Harry was aware that Hermione was in pain. He was floating, blissfully, happily, warmly... but he could hear her. He wanted desperately to reach out, assure her that he was fine, he was happier than he'd ever been, really. She had no reason to worry... none at all...

She was crying. This shocked Harry, and he tried to pull himself out of his safe cocoon in order to reach her.

Then he heard Ron's voice. This calmed him. Ron was with her... Ron would make sure she was okay...

"It's okay, Hermione," he heard Ron say. "It's only been a few days. He'll wake up. I mean, he's alive, isn't he?"

There was a loud snuffle. "But we don't know... Fudge was right, Ron. We don't know if it's him... we don't know if Voldemort... if he's going to be..."

"No, no way. Don't say that... you were certain. You reached him, Hermione. I was there... you pulled Harry back. No way is he going to let You-Know-Who win after that."

There were more cries. "I'm just so tired...."

"Hey," Ron said softly. "It's okay, Hermione. Of course you're tired. You haven't slept in days."

"Neither have you."

"Then we'll sleep together."

The comment was nearly enough to jolt Harry wide awake. He was filled with a deep desire to grab his wand, point it at Ron's throat... use the most painful curse he could...

Hermione chuckled. "Ron, are you coming on to me?"

"What?" Ron asked, completely bewildered. "No! I just asked if you.... Oh...."

Harry relaxed. Hermione's tears had slowed. Ron was there. They were both watching over him. Assured that everything was okay, Harry allowed himself to drift again. He wasn't ready yet. He wasn't nearly read yet...

Harry could feel her. She was everywhere. Her familiar scent, a hint of vanilla and tea and old books washed over him. Her lips were on his face, tracing over his skin. Nothing had ever felt more wonderful or soothing...

Her lips brushed his cheeks, gentle and soft, tenderly caressing him. They brushed the tip of his nose, hovered there before turning into a slight smile. She traced kisses over his eyelids, and his forehead. She pressed her lips to his scar, he could feel her warmth soothing him, washing away the pain his scar had caused him...

"Really, Hermione, you two haven't gotten back together yet!" Ron said, in an exasperated voice. "Leave the poor bloke alone, he can't very well do anything to stop you."

Her lips were gone and Harry desperately missed the contact. He tried to tell her that it was okay, he knew she was there, things would be fine...

"Nonsense, Ron," Hermione said briskly. "We got back together ages ago."

"No, you haven't!" Ron said sharply. "He's been unconscious!"

"Don't be so thick," she snapped. "We got back together. Harry just doesn't know it yet."

"Oh, well then that makes it okay, does it?"

"Yes," Hermione shot back. "It does. I don't care what he says... he's way stronger with me than without me..."

"Yes, but..." Ron trailed off, sounding annoyed. "Fine," he finally muttered. "I don't understand it, but fine. Go back to nuzzling him then. I'm just not going to watch."

Harry's heart soared when Hermione's lips began making their way across his face again. She brushed her lips to his and Harry wanted nothing more than to kiss her back... to let her know that he could hear her... that he loved her...

He still couldn't move, though he could sense her completely. Her lips went away, but her hands replaced them, smoothing over his features. She traced his mouth and his cheek lightly with her fingertips before smoothing his forehead.

In that moment Harry knew he didn't want to go away. He wanted to wake up, he wanted to kiss her back, but more than anything he wanted to tell her not to stop.

He heard footsteps and Hermione pulled away.

"Oh, don't stop on account of me," Dumbledore said lightly. "I'm sure a little bit of reassuring contact from you, Hermione, is more comfort than any kind of potion Madam Pomfrey can give him."

"Yeah," Harry heard himself say. "Don't stop."

Silence.

Harry struggled to open his eyes. He managed it, though his vision was plenty blurry. He could just make out Hermione, Ron, and Dumbledore peering down at them, mouths slightly agape.

"Err," he said nervously. "Hi..."

Silence.

Harry was beginning to imagine that he'd made the entire thing up and he was having another dream. He tried to sit up and found that it was too difficult. He settled for groping for his glasses instead, annoyed when he found he couldn't lift his arm.

"Harry?" Hermione's voice, barely a whisper, yet full of hope.

Harry grinned. "Hey," he said softly. "What did I say about not stopping?"

Then she was crushing him so hard that Harry was momentarily afraid that he wouldn't be able to breathe. Her lips were back on his face, trailing desperate kisses over his features. She was emitting little squeaking noises and whimpers, his name coming out every other syllable.

Harry tried to hug her back. Then he tried to turn his head to kiss her. Then he got very frustrated.

"Err," he managed, slightly distracted by Hermione's mouth on his face. "Why can't I move?"

Hermione pulled away from him and stared down at him. Harry squinted at her, wishing that someone would give him his glasses. "Oh!" she said sheepishly. "Um, about that..."

"You can't move for a while, Harry," Ron said bluntly. "The Ministry's afraid that You-Know-Who has permanently taken you over."

"WHAT?" Harry demanded, wishing desperately that he could at least sit up.

"Harry," Dumbledore said calmly. "I am afraid that not everyone is as certain as we are that you managed to fight Voldemort. In order to keep you here at Hogwarts..."

"We put a spell on you so you can't move," Hermione finished heavily. "Sorry."

Harry blinked. "I'm not!" he shouted. "I'm not Voldemort! I just want to sit up! I want to see! WHERE ARE MY GLASSES?"

Ron recovered first from the outburst, and placed Harry's glasses on his nose. "You know, Harry," he said. "If you don't want anyone to think you're nutters, you might want to drop the attitude."

Harry scowled, but was very much relieved when he could see everyone properly. "I'm not..."

"We know," Ron interrupted irritably. "But the problem is... no one else believes us. You gotta understand, Harry. People are terrified. All they know is that Voldemort somehow managed to threaten their children... through you."

"Well, I didn't mean for him to!" Harry snapped, angrily. "You think it was easy being possessed by Voldemort? You have no idea! There was... it was pain like I'd never felt before...." Harry trailed off when Hermione let out a small whimper. He tried to reach out a hand to reassure her and his inability to do so angered him more than anything else.

"Harry, look," Ron continued, nervously. "There's nothing that we can do. Fudge wanted to throw you into a Ministry prison. Some people even suggested Azkaban. You have to understand, none of us really knew what you were going to wake up as."

"Well, now you know! LET ME UP!"

Ron's face flushed with embarrassment and he seemed very intent at looking at the ground. "Well, that's sort of the problem," he muttered. "We don't really know for sure..."

Harry couldn't believe it. He found Hermione with his gaze. "And what about you?" he asked softly. "Do you believe that I'm Voldemort?"

Her eyes filled with tears and she chewed on her bottom lip nervously. "Of course I don't... but... Ron's right... I mean, it's just a precaution, really..."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. "Oh, I see."

Hermione let out a tearful sigh and Harry tried very hard not to let it effect him. Her hand smoothed over his brow, and Harry felt himself relax despite himself. Harry reluctantly opened his eyes to find her staring down at him intently.

"I know it's you," she whispered fiercely. "I would hardly go around kissing Voldemort, would I?"

Harry attempted to shake his head. "No," he finally said.

"It really is just a precaution, Harry. And Ron's telling the truth, if we hadn't... well, I wasn't going to let them take you away."

Harry's heart leaped at her words. He licked at his lips, and continued to look in her eyes. "Did you mean what you said?" he finally asked, a little hoarsely. "When you said that you loved me?"

Her eyes filled with tears and she nodded.

Harry smiled widely. "I love you, too. More than anything... it was because of you that I'm... well, that I'm not... you know..."

Harry squeezed her hand and they both jumped lightly at the unexpected contact. In experimentation, he moved his arm, watching happily as it followed his request. Next he struggled to sit up, but found himself too weak to do so.

Dumbledore cleared his throat lightly. Harry, who had completely forgotten that he was in the room, turned to look at him in surprise. "Err, Professor, I don't think that your spell is working..."

"No, no," Dumbledore said quickly, eyes twinkling merrily. "It worked perfectly. You see, Harry... there is one thing that separates you and Voldemort completely. My spell recognized that, thus removing its power over you. Really quite ingenious, really."

Harry held Hermione's hand a little tighter. "Love," he whispered.

Dumbledore nodded. "The ability to love and to be loved in return. That is what makes Voldemort so purely evil. The complete absence of love..."

A connection formed in Harry's brain. "Professor," he said urgently. "Something happened... after... after I pushed Voldemort out..."

Dumbledore looked grave. "I am aware of that, Harry."

Hermione whimpered softly, and Harry turned to look at her. She looked deathly pale and was clutching his hand to the point of pain.

"What is it?" he asked gently.

Hermione just shook her head.

"We thought you were dead, Harry," Ron said bluntly. "I reckon you should have been. Your heart wasn't beating or anything. It must have been... I dunno 10 minutes, at least."

"I never..."

"You came back," Ron continued. "People were losing it all over the place. We all thought that You-Know-Who had succeeded. But then... you just started breathing again." Ron shrugged helplessly. "You've been unconscious ever since..."

"How long?"

"Five days," Hermione answered quickly.

Harry struggled to sit up again, even as he felt his heart plummeting. "Oh no," he moaned. "Quidditch... what happened?"

Ron looked hesitant. "Well... that, um... that's... there's..."

"No need to concern yourself with that, Harry," Hermione said nervously. "Hardly important, really, in the grand scheme of things..."

Harry looked back and forth between them. "What happened?"

Ron shifted uncomfortably. "Well... it's possible that... there might have been... we may have had to..."

"Yes?"

"Harry," Hermione said gently. "Gryffindor was forced to forfeit."

"Forfeit? We had to forfeit?"

Ron shifted again. "Well, we couldn't very well train a new Seeker... besides, we knew we couldn't play. Not without you there."

"What?" Harry demanded. "After all that work I did to try and catch up and you just gave up?"

Harry started when Hermione smacked him on the arm. "Harry!" she shrieked and Harry was surprised to see tears forming in her eyes. "You almost died! No one cared about Quidditch! It doesn't matter, don't you understand? It doesn't matter."

"Oh... hey..." Harry said, beginning to feel stupid. "I'm sorry... I... you're right. I know you're right. Just... please, Hermione... don't cry..."

"I'm not crying!" she snapped, beginning to rub at her eyes.

Harry reached out a hand towards her, brushing a tear out of the way with his fingertip. "It's okay..." he whispered. "See... I'm alive and here and... and hopelessly in love with you... so just don't... don't cry..."

Hermione sniffled. "I know... I just..." she blinked back tears. "When I thought I'd lost you... Harry... I love you, too... very much..."

Harry smiled. "I love you more."

Hesitantly, Hermione smiled back. "I love you more," she whispered.

"I love you more."

"I love you—"

"AHEM!" Ron cleared his throat loudly. "Thank you. I suppose it's safe to assume you've gotten back together, then?"

In response, Harry and Hermione continued grinning at each other.

Ron rolled his eyes. "That's just... great. Step up from the whole 'we're just friends' dance. Really. Carry on."

Dumbledore seemed very intent at looking at the ceiling and humming. "Have we re-painted in here recently?" he asked lightly.

The three of them looked at the ceiling. It looked like it always had. Ron frowned and gave Dumbledore one of his, 'You're completely mad, even if you are the most powerful wizard in the world' looks.

Dumbledore, seeing that he had their attention, smiled serenely at them all. "Ahh," he said, looking delighted. "There we are."

Harry, once again, struggled to sit up. Much to his dismay, he found that, once again, he could not manage it. There was nothing he hated more than having a serious discussion about his imminent death when he was flat on his back and helpless. It made him feel more... well... helpless.

Hermione finally seemed to notice his struggles and, grasping his arm, helped him sit up. Feeling somewhat lightheaded and weak from the movement, Harry focused his attention on Dumbledore. He was comforted when Hermione sat on the bed next to him, curling up at his side and entwining her fingers through his.

Dumbledore was watching him shrewdly. Harry hated when he did that, feeling like Dumbledore was looking right through him until he could see his most inner thoughts. "Harry, I think your version of events is the most important. Right now, there are only three people that know you have awakened. That will soon change. The wizarding world is going to be clambering to discover what occurred. Many have already released their own, private theories."

"Whatever you do," Ron said. "Don't read the Daily Prophet. Hermione and I will comb it for you."

Harry swallowed. "Am I back to being nutters?"

Ron looked embarrassed. "That's one of the... nicer... terms."

Dumbledore was still peering at him in concentration. "I have my own theory as to what happened, Harry. I know that this must be very painful for you... asking you to relive what occurred, but it is a necessity."

Instinctively, Harry reached up and pressed a hand to his scar. His head still throbbed... and he could remember all too well the pain the scar had caused him...

"It started after I was done my shepherd's pie, but before I'd started on the salad," Harry said, a hint of amusement in his voice. "My scar... it twinged a little. It'd been doing that all year and I was used to it. It was far better than the migraines I used to get when Voldemort was feeling a particularly strong emotion. It turned sharper, more like the old pain, but nothing that I wasn't used to. I just waited for it to pass. And it did, it went away."

Harry swallowed, remembering with vivid detail the way his head had exploded next, how he hadn't been able to think... how Voldemort had pushed himself in. "Then... it started again. I've only felt that kind of pain once before. In the Department of Mysteries... last time that Voldemort tried to... well, you know. When the pain subsided enough so I could think, it was too late. I couldn't do anything, I couldn't fight him, I could only watch as he took control." Harry gave a violent shudder, and Hermione pressed herself more tightly against him.

Harry absentmindedly skimmed a hand over Hermione's hair. "You know what happens next, anyway. Voldemort went after Hermione. And I knew I couldn't let him get away with it, so that's when I started to push against whatever hold he had over me. I could feel him weakening and it spurred me on, though the pain was so much at that point I couldn't understand why I was still alive."

"When Hermione told me that she loved me, I felt something well up inside me. It was different than anything I had ever felt before. Voldemort couldn't handle it. He fled, but I kept pushing. There must have been some kind of a reverse action because, next thing I knew, I wasn't... me, anymore. I was in... in Voldemort... I was there, I was in control... I could... feel everything he felt. It was cold, dark, blackness.... I couldn't take it for long, but I knew I had to keep pushing. I didn't want Voldemort to win, I wanted him to know I was strong enough to possess him in return. Anyway," Harry let out a shaky breath. "I didn't last too long. I finally let myself drift... and I don't really remember what happened after that."

Dumbledore nodded. "I suspected as much."

"Harry... are you saying..." Ron swallowed heavily. "Are you saying that you were You-Know-Who?"

"No," Harry said immediately. "I wasn't... not exactly..."

"Voldemort's plan was well constructed." Dumbledore frowned heavily, looking pensive. "He possessed Harry, in the middle of the Great Hall, at a mealtime, in hopes that I would kill Harry to protect the other students." Dumbledore sighed. "Fortunate for us, Voldemort's attempt backfired. Harry managed, however briefly, to possess Voldemort in return. Do you understand why it was so difficult to remain in control after you possessed Voldemort, Harry?"

Harry shrugged.

Hermione, who had been oddly quiet, spoke up. "The one thing Voldemort can't understand is love. And the one thing that Harry can't understand is evil. So..." she said slowly. "It was the opposite of why Voldemort couldn't maintain control over you, Harry..."

Dumbledore nodded. "A darkness such as that, Harry... it's a mere wonder you held on as long as you did. We are, however, very lucky that you did. Voldemort is, above all else, concerned primarily with his

own self-interest. I do not believe that he will attempt something similar in the future."

"What if he does?" Harry whispered. "I can hardly do anything about it at the moment. I can barely keep my eyes open. If Voldemort wanted—"

"Voldemort, Harry," Dumbledore cut in gently. "Is just as incapacitated at the moment. The strength required to possess and control the mind of another wizard takes an extraordinary toll on the body. What you are suffering from now is pure mental exhaustion."

Harry nodded, his eyes growing heavy. He couldn't ever remember feeling so tired in his life. He struggled to stay awake, desperate for answers. "Professor..." he asked slowly. "Would you really kill me? If Voldemort were to ever possess me again..." Harry shivered. "I think that's what I would want."

Dumbledore's eyes bore into his own. "I don't know, Harry," he finally said softly. "I'm sorry that I don't have a better answer for you."

Harry shut his eyes, too exhausted to keep them open and nodded bleakly.

Ron's voice sounded shaky. "But... You-Know-Who won't, right? He'd be too nervous to try again..."

"I'm assuming so," Dumbledore said.

Ron gulped. "Okay. Okay, good... that's... good..."

Ron's voice blurred and Harry pressed a hand to his scar. It burned under his touch and he struggled to get past the burning headache that started behind it. "I'm passing out," he muttered.

Ron sounded worried. "You're going to go unconscious again?"

"No," Harry said, feeling dizzy. "I just think I'm about to sleep for a long time."

"Very well, Harry," Dumbledore said, standing up. "Get your rest. The world will know, soon enough, that you have awakened." His voice quieted, became gentler. "People are going to be demanding answers." Dumbledore sighed. "I'm going to contact the Ministry. Rest assured, Harry, I won't allow any of them in to visit you."

Harry didn't have the energy to make a comment. He felt himself nodding off, vaguely hearing Hermione scramble off the bed beside him. He missed her immediately, but didn't have the energy to open his eyes and tell her so. Then he was gone, letting his mind rest and sleep envelope him.

A/N: Whew. Before anyone has a chance to ask, Harry and Hermione still do have a lot to talk about. Yes, everything is out in the open and they're not going to be parting anytime soon. But things aren't magically better between them. The entirety of next chapter is going to focus solely on them and the "feelings talk."

Harry opened his eyes to perfect stillness. He blinked sleepily, groping for his glasses on the bedside table. Pushing his glasses up his nose, he yawned and struggled to sit up, mentally congratulating himself when he managed to accomplish that feat. Hearing a slight rustling of paper, he turned sharply.

Hermione was curled up in an armchair by his bed, a book spread open on her lap. There was a small lamp flickering beside her, making her pale face appear soft and gentle. Harry swallowed and smiled at her. It was a comfort knowing that she was nearby.

She felt his eyes on her and looked up, startled to find him watching her. "Harry," she said softly. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not long," he answered. "What are you reading?"

Hermione glanced down at her book as if surprised to find it there. "I wasn't, really. I was thinking."

Harry peered at her, wondering if she was going to elaborate. When she didn't, he cleared his throat. "What time is it?"

She blinked at him, and Harry could tell that she was exhausted. "I don't... I don't really know. Sometime in the middle of the night, I suppose."

"Hermione," he said gently. "When was the last time that you slept?"

She just shook her head. "I know it sounds silly, but I'm afraid to go to sleep. I want to watch over you, I guess. I know, I'm being stupid, but I can't... I know how much pain you're in and..." she trailed off, chewing her lip nervously. "I worry."

"I understand," Harry whispered.

They stared at each other for a beat and Harry unconsciously licked his lips. Hermione fiddled with her book, dropping her gaze to settle on the floor. "Dumbledore... he let me... stay here... with you..." she paused. "Just... if you were wondering..."

“Oh,” Harry said. “That’s...”

“Madam Pomfrey wasn’t thrilled about it,” Hermione continued, still not looking at him “Seemed to think that we might... that it was...”

“Inappropriate?” Harry offered.

Hermione blushed and shrugged. They lapsed into awkward silence again.

“Harry...” she said slowly.

“Yeah?” he said quickly. “What?”

“I—nothing...”

“Oh... okay...”

“Are you...”

“Yeah?”

“Never mind,” Hermione said.

Harry sighed. “Hermione... this is... I think that... it might be a good idea if...”

She looked up at him hopefully. “Yes?”

“If... maybe we—never mind...”

Hermione let out a little squeak of frustration. “Goodness gracious, Harry, just say it and put the both of us out of our misery!”

“I—okay,” he said, smiling at her. “I think we need to talk.”

She smiled back at him. “Really?”

“Yeah... there’s, you know... we should...” Harry thought for a moment. “We should talk about our feelings...”

Hermione raised her eyebrows, looking amused. "I wasn't aware that boys knew how to talk about their feelings."

"We don't," Harry said quickly. "But... I mean..."

"It's okay," Hermione said softly. "I think you're right. I think we need to—"

"Talk?"

Hermione nodded and released a breath. "Okay."

They lapsed into silence and Harry bit the inside of his cheek, willing himself to say something, anything. He was frozen, petrified that she'd change her mind and realize he wasn't worth everything he'd put her through. After a long minute that stretched out, Harry cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"I, um... I think that..." Harry trailed off, feeling useless and stupid. Refusing to meet her eyes, he stared dejectedly ahead of him. "This is really difficult."

Hermione shifted and Harry's gaze returned to her form. She smiled shyly, depositing her book on the chair. Hesitantly, she rose and approached him.

"Do you think that it'd be okay if I just..." Hermione flushed, looking embarrassed. "Held... on to you... for a little while?"

Harry felt a large bubble of relief burst inside him. "I think that'd be more than okay."

Hermione waited another beat before curling up against him, letting out a small sigh when he wrapped his arms around her. She closed her eyes, pressing her face against his chest and breathing him in. Harry swallowed with difficulty, feeling contentment rise up inside him.

"How's your head?" she said quietly, breaking him out of his reverie.

Harry blinked a few times, the familiar pain of his scar throbbing on his forehead. "It doesn't matter..." he mumbled.

"It does."

"Hermione..." he started, not quite sure what he wanted to say.

"Shhh," she said sharply. She threw a leg over his torso and shifted her weight to her knees, straddling him.

Harry swallowed heavily. "Err, Hermione... what are you...?"

She pushed gently at his chest. "Shush," she said again. He closed his mouth and allowed her to push him back down on the bed. "Close your eyes," she said softly.

Harry closed his eyes obediently, wondering what she was doing. Soon he could feel her hands in his hair, gently messaging his scalp. He couldn't quite contain his moan of pleasure. She continued to message his head, bending down so she could trail her lips along his scar. She pressed tiny kisses to his forehead, her lips light as a feather as they traced his skin.

Harry felt himself relaxing under her attentions. He sucked in a breath, his headache beginning to ebb. She was so gentle and loving. Her lips smoothed away his pain, her hands on his head calmed him like nothing else could. When she pulled away, he was smiling.

"Now?" she asked.

"Better. Much better."

"Good," she said firmly, lying down so that her head fit under the crook of his neck.

"Thank you."

"Hey," she said softly, tilting her head up to peck his chin. "It's okay to let me take care of you every once in a while."

Unsure of a response, Harry just nodded. Lazily, he stroked her back in random motions, and she closed her eyes, a peaceful expression on her face.

"We're avoiding it," she said suddenly.

"Avoiding what?"

She huffed out a breath. "I think you know."

Harry hated it when she was right. He moved his hand to her hair, contenting himself with twirling her soft curls aimlessly through his fingertips. There wasn't really any easy way to start this conversation. He resisted the urge to sigh.

"So, err, how did you feel when you thought I was dead?"

"How do you think I felt?" she demanded heatedly, her eyes opening to glare at him.

"I'm not," Harry said quickly. "Dead, I mean. I'm not..."

She sniffled and Harry winced. He hadn't said that as soothingly as he would have liked.

"I mean," he said stiffly. "If you want to talk about it... it might make you feel better..."

Hermione's eyes clouded over and she nodded. "It was the worst ten minutes of my life," she said. "There was so much... confusion. No one knew what was happening. People were screaming and running. You just... collapsed. I remember staring at you. Just staring at you. I could hear everything, the screaming, the panic, but none of it seemed to register." Hermione stopped, her voice catching. "Ron was the one who checked for a pulse."

She trembled once, violently, and Harry instinctively held her a little tighter. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm here... I'm not going anywhere, I promise."

She nodded, her eyes filling with tears. "The look on Ron's face told me everything I needed to know. There was so much I felt then. There was an aching emptiness, so much grief... there was anger like I'd never felt before," Hermione said bitterly. "If I could have found Voldemort in that moment, I would have killed the bastard, I promise you. Then I think I sort of came to. I was in an office, Professor McGonagall was there, she kept asking me if I wanted a glass of water. Hagrid was sobbing uncontrollably, he kept trying to comfort me, but he couldn't get a hold of himself. Finally, Ron came in and all he did was hold me. He held me so tightly I thought I might burst. At some point I realized he was crying."

Hermione let out a shuddery breath and Harry blinked at her. "Ron cried for me?"

"Of course he did, you moron. Ron loves you." Off his horrified look, Hermione frowned. "Honestly, Harry! You know what I meant..."

"Yeah... okay..." Harry said, grinning.

"Shut it," she said. "I felt like I should have been crying, too. I couldn't. It was like someone had shut off all my emotions and I was just... standing there. When Dumbledore came in and said you were breathing again..." Hermione shook her head, a tear slipping down her cheek. "I felt like I could breathe again, too. It felt like... I could live again. That's when I started to sob. I couldn't stop. I was yelling and screaming and demanding to see you. I was completely hysterical. It took Ron, Hagrid, and McGonagall to hold me down while Dumbledore forced some potion down my throat. Next thing I knew, I was waking up in the hospital wing and you were lying beside me, sleeping peacefully as if nothing had happened. I crawled in next to you and just... listened to you breathe for a while. It was the most amazing sound I'd ever heard in my life."

There was a lump in Harry's throat when he wrapped his arms around her and crushed her against him. "It's all because of you," he said quietly. "I'm here because of you."

She started crying then, hard sobs that racked through her body. Harry just stroked her hair, and whispered to her, holding her close.

He tried to put into words all that she meant to him, but that failed and he settled for just soothing her instead. Eventually her sobs quieted to small whimpers. She pressed her face against his chest and Harry felt her relaxing against him.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," Harry whispered.

"About what?" she asked, her voice hoarse with tears.

"Everything!" he burst out, his voice sharp. "It's not fair! All I do is hurt you! I wish that I didn't... I wish that..." Harry stopped. "It doesn't matter. It never stops with me, don't you see? I can't promise you that I won't ever leave you because I might! I might die, tomorrow, next week, next year! You deserve someone that—"

"Stop," Hermione screeched, hands going to her ears. Her face was tear-stained as she turned it towards his. "Stop," she pleaded. "Stop pushing me away, Harry. I won't listen."

Harry shook his head miserably, looking away. "I need you so much," he whispered quietly. "It's not normal to need someone as much as I need you. I don't think it matters how far I push you. Because of who I am, Hermione... I can't bear the thought of something happening to you because of who I am."

Hermione let out a tearful breath and got off the bed. Harry watched her with his eyes, missing the contact of her warm body desperately. It only reinforced how dependent on her he'd become. She paced in front of him, rubbing at her eyes and taking long, deep breaths.

"I've been thinking. A lot. About everything." She stopped her pacing and stared down at him. "I asked Dumbledore for a copy of the prophecy. I've been reading and studying it, looking for some kind of loophole, some kind of... I don't know, really. I just... I refused to accept the simple truth in it. Anyway," she cleared her throat. "I suppose that it is awfully clear, all things considered. But I realized... when I was reading it..."

Harry goggled at her, impressed by the sheer amount of time she spent doing things on his behalf. "So?" he prodded. "What did you realize?"

She thought for a moment and tapped her fingers together in concentration. "You're not going to die," she said finally. "You're The Boy Who Lived, Harry. There's a reason for that name. It'd simply be ridiculous, not to mention impractical, to get a tombstone for you that read: 'Here's the Boy Who Lived Who Died.'"

"Yes, but the irony would be delicious."

She shot him a look. "That's not funny."

He sobered. "But it doesn't make any sense. What do I have that Dumbledore doesn't? How can I defeat Voldemort when Dumbledore can't?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, Harry. That's something we're going to figure out. But you've already face him, what, six times now? And won? That has to count for something, right? There's something about you. I know you didn't ask for it, Harry. I know that you don't want this kind of a responsibility. But it's yours. And you'll do what you need to."

Harry stared down at his hands. "I don't want to become a murderer."

Hermione shivered and rubbed her arms. Harry noticed that little goose bumps had appeared on her flesh. "If killing Voldemort was as simple as using the killing curse, he'd already be dead now. No, it's something more than that. I don't think this is about you having to murder. You're a good wizard, Harry. Banishing Voldemort will be something different, but it won't be murder. No... it's not that simple..."

Harry looked at her, feeling a new hope well in his heart. He hadn't thought about it that way. She was probably right. He knew that he could never use the killing curse, no matter the situation. He knew he'd never be able to muster enough hate to manage it. Why had he waited so long to tell her about the prophecy? He should have known

that Hermione would pick it apart until it suited her needs. He smiled a little to himself.

Encouraged by his reaction, Hermione sat down on the bed and sought out his hand. "And if," she continued, her eyes finding his and holding them. "And if you need me to defeat Voldemort... then, logically, I'm not going to be going anywhere either, am I? Since we've already decided that you won't die, and if you need me to kill him, then I better stay alive." Her eyes became fiercer. "I promise you, Harry. I won't leave you as long as you need me."

"I'll never stop needing you," he said immediately.

"Then I won't ever die, will I?" she said, squeezing his hand.

Harry just nodded, tears threatening his vision. "You know," he joked weakly. "For someone as manly as I am... I certainly do cry a lot..."

"I told you, you don't ever have to pretend around me."

Harry gave her a shaky smile and forced his tears back. "Hermione, I have a reputation to uphold, you know. I can't start crying uncontrollably every time I get the least bit emotional. It's embarrassing."

She rolled her eyes. "Would it help if I swore not to tell Ron?"

"He'd know, anyway," Harry responded immediately. "I swear, he'd look at me and know." Harry's face suddenly split into a grin. "Of course, he cried over me. I can use that..."

Hermione jabbed him on the shoulder.

"Ow."

"You certainly will not."

"Fine," Harry grumbled. "Ruin my fun."

Hermione smiled and squeezed his hand. "So, officially, we are..."

"Best friends who sometimes kiss and never see other people?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Also known as boyfriend and girlfriend. But who's keeping track?"

"Certainly not me," Harry said. Smile disappearing, he regarded her seriously. "If you're willing... I'd like to try it again. I know that things have been... downright painful recently. I know that I've hurt you badly and that I've put you through more than you deserve. But I can't... I can't do this without you. If you'll let me try again, I'll be... better this time, Hermione. I promise."

Hermione bit her lip. "Don't make promises you can't keep, Harry." She met his eyes. "Just let yourself believe that I love you and that I'm exactly where I want to be. And that... that'll be a good start."

Harry swallowed back the lump in his throat. "Hermione?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes?" she said, eyes fixed on his.

"Can I kiss you now?"

"Yes, please."

They moved forward at the same time, meeting each other halfway there. The first touch of their lips had both of them stilling and Harry's hand hesitantly encircled her back, pulling her closer. The kiss deepened, slow and lazy as they took the time to taste each other after so long spent apart.

They pulled away, smiling and flushed. Harry felt a warmth rise up inside him, a happiness that he couldn't ever remember feeling. Hermione's smile was blinding and she kissed both his cheeks before settling herself against him with a tiny sigh of pleasure.

"If you ever break up with me again," she said drowsily, fingers tracing small circles on his collarbone. "I'm not taking you back. I don't care how stupid you're being."

Harry couldn't hold back his grin. "Thanks, Hermione."

"No problem," she said, yawning widely.

"Do you think..." Harry began. "That we could... maybe keep it hush, hush for a while this time?"

"Harry," Hermione said, sounding irritated. "I saved your life in the Great Hall by telling you I loved you. The entire school was watching. How hush hush do you think we can keep that?"

Harry winced. "Good point."

She smiled again at him, her eyes growing bright as she did so. Harry could do nothing but grin back at her, feeling a familiar pool of warmth settle in his stomach.

"We're fated, you know," she said softly.

"Huh?"

"You know," Hermione continued. "Destiny, fate, whatever. We are."

Harry blinked stupidly at her. "Are you joking?" he managed. "See us written in the stars, did you?"

She gave him a disgruntled look before sliding off the bed. She plucked her forgotten book up from the armchair before returning. Harry looked at the title warily: *Wizards and Ancient Greek Symbols*. She settled down comfortably against him again, furiously turning pages.

Harry waited patiently. For about 30 seconds. "Hermione? What are you going on about?"

"Aha!" she said triumphantly. "Hippogriffs. Ancient Greek symbol for love. Hippogriffs are a symbol of impossible love," she read. "And the eventual triumph over that impossibility." She shoved the book in his

face. Harry blinked at it, seeing a rather large picture of a pink Hippogriff. "You see?"

"Not really..."

She snapped the book shut under his nose and looked annoyed. "Do you even remember Buckbeak? We saved him! Together! Then I held on to you when we rode him to save..." Hermione trailed off. "When we, you know..."

Harry ignored the immediate pang he felt upon thinking about his godfather. Hermione continued to peer up at him hopefully. Something in his mind was beginning to connect.

"Hey!" he said. "We were the ones that saved Buckbeak! Buckbeak was a Hippogriff! Hippogriffs are a symbol for love..."

Hermione looked delighted. "See? We were fated."

Harry grinned. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah... I guess we were...."

"Wait until I tell you my theory on time turners and circles and... you're not the least bit interested, are you?"

Harry wasn't. He'd had more than enough symbols and prophecies to last him a bloody lifetime, thank you very much. He and Hermione were together now. That was the important thing. Still, he couldn't quite bring himself to disappoint her.

"Erm... I'm just... tired, I guess. You know, still a little worn out. All that emotional exhaustion Dumbledore was going on about. Trying to stand up would probably make me past out."

Hermione clearly didn't believe him, but she let him pretend that she did and he supposed that was more than enough. And it was true, to a degree. He probably wouldn't pass out if he attempted to stand up, but he was fairly certain that falling flat on his face wouldn't be the most enjoyable experience, either.

Instead of making a comment, Hermione leaned up and pressed her lips to his. Harry closed his eyes, awash in the sensation. She tasted just like he remembered, sweet like pumpkin pie and vanilla. She kissed him desperately, her tongue demanding entrance into his mouth. Her hands somehow found his and held them tightly, as they continued to lose themselves in their kissing.

It was a long time later when they finally broke apart. Harry allowed himself the simple luxury of lying back, his eyes closed, with Hermione still snuggled up next to him, her loud breathing echoing through the hospital wing.

"Definitely one of the things I missed most about being with you..." Hermione said dreamily.

"I knew you were just using me."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, that's exactly why I've spent years pining over you."

Harry thought about that for a moment. "Hang on," he managed. "Years?" he stared down at her suspiciously. "Exactly how long have you liked me?"

She shrugged delicately. "I'm not telling you."

"Hermione!" he said, frustrated. "Why not?"

"Because..." she trailed off and said in a rush. "It's embarrassing."

"What?" he yelped. "What's wrong with liking me?"

"Because you didn't like me," she said simply. "It it's rather silly, isn't it? Liking someone who doesn't like you back?"

Harry just stared at her. "What are you talking about?" he managed. "I love you."

Hermione sighed. "Yes, but this is a relatively new feeling for you. I'm not an idiot, Harry. I knew how you felt about Cho."

Harry blushed. "You still should have said something," he said quietly.

"Right," Hermione said irritably. "That would have been a great idea. Ron liked me, I liked you, and you liked Cho. If I had said something... well, it would have done more harm than good, don't you think?"

"Maybe," Harry admitted, with some difficulty.

Hermione sighed. "I think it started sometime in our third year."

"When what started?"

"When I started to like you, for Merlin's sakes."

"That long?" Harry said. "And I never noticed?"

"You were always a little bit thick when it came to girls."

"Was not!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I don't really know what I was feeling, only that I seemed to grab on to you an awful lot when I was scared. Honestly, I thought I might have liked Ron a little bit, since that's when we started fighting a lot. At some point I realized that it was simply that, fighting. It was because he annoyed me, not because I had some secret desire to go off someplace and snog him."

"You thought about snogging Ron?"

"Oh, yes," Hermione said immediately. "Constantly. Didn't you know?"

Harry frowned at her. "I hope you're joking."

"It wasn't really until Fourth-Year that I started thinking about it. Harry, have you ever wondered what it was that made Skeeter write all those articles?"

"Erm..." Harry thought about it. "Dunno, Hermione. For money?"

Hermione looked thoughtful. "Perhaps..." her eyebrows creased as she pondered. "It was really Viktor who made me realize what was going on."

"Still on first name basis, are you?" Harry asked, a little snippily.

"Stop interrupting," Hermione snapped. "Do you want to hear this or not?"

"I just want you to know that I think Viktor's a stupid name. It makes him sound all old and crotchety. And did I ever tell you that I thought he was way too old for you? I mean, he was 18, Hermione! You were only 14! There is only one thing that 18-year-old boys want..."

"He was a gentleman!" Hermione hissed sharply. "Besides, you were my first kiss! You know that!"

"Still," Harry grumbled. "It doesn't mean that he didn't want..."

Hermione kissed him. Harry vaguely realized that she was probably doing that in attempt to make him shut up, but he didn't really care. She grinned when she pulled away.

"Still jealous?" she asked softly, her breath still dancing across his skin.

"Nope," he said quickly, reaching for her again.

Hermione pulled away and Harry frowned. "So, anyway," she went on. "Remember the conversation Krum and I had on the last day of school?"

"Uh huh," Harry answered absently, tugging her closer.

He slid his arms around her waist, moving his lips to her neck. He pressed tiny kisses to her skin, congratulating himself when she let out soft gasps of pleasure. She tilted her head back and he moved to her chin, letting his lips slide just under her mouth. She let out an irritated moan and he smiled, hands traveling further up her back. Their lips met and Harry took the initiative, coaxing her mouth open

and deepening the kiss. He nibbled gently on her bottom lip, tongue slipping out to meet hers.

She pulled slightly away from him, but Harry tightened his hold on her and moved to the rest of her face. He continued to press tiny kisses to her cheeks and forehead, enjoying the smoothness of her skin under his lips. At some point he realized that she'd gone back to talking.

"Well, I guess he broke up with me then. I don't suppose there was much to break up from, but I know he held rather deep feelings for me. Anyway, he said that he thought that I... oh... that feels nice..."

Harry grunted in response, hands trailing up and down her back so that she shivered against him.

"He was really quite jealous," Hermione continued, sounding out of breath. "He thought I had feelings for Ron and that, as long as I did, I'd never like him back."

Harry pulled sharply away from her, eyes blazing. "What?" he yelled. "He thought you had feelings for who?"

"I thought that might get your attention," Hermione said smugly.

Harry scowled deeply. "He was jealous of me, wasn't he?"

Hermione chuckled. "Yes, he was. He knew I liked you."

"Did I ever tell you that he confronted me?" Harry grinned slightly at the memory. "He demanded to know what was between you and me. He said that you talked about me all the time."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly, it wasn't that often. I was worried about you. I knew something terrible would happen because of that Triwizard tournament."

"And you shared your fears with Viktor?" Harry said, still grinning. "Aww, Hermione, that's so sweet."

Hermione scowled. "It's a good thing you're not a great bit jealous possessive prat."

"How flattering. Thank you."

"Can't you just accept how I feel about you? Honestly, Harry, there's no need to be so insecure..." Hermione trailed off before beginning again with difficulty. "Well, you should know, it's always been you. Even when it wasn't."

Feeling at a loss for words, Harry stared up at the ceiling. "I know," he finally managed. "Me, too."

Hermione started snickering and Harry craned his neck to look down at her, a bewildered expression on his face. "What?" he demanded. "What's so funny?"

She waved a hand, still snickering. "It's just..." she said, gasping slightly. "We've become so... sappy."

Harry snorted. "We have not. We could be loads more sappy. Besides, you're a girl, you're supposed to like all that mushy nonsense."

"Oh, I do like it," Hermione said, still laughing. "I just never expected you to be the romantic, gushy type."
Harry frowned suspiciously. "I'm gushy?"

Hermione gained control of herself. "No, you're perfect."

They stared at each other for a moment before Harry shook his head ruefully. "Okay—that's what makes us sappy."

"Sappy's okay," Hermione decided, closing her eyes and snuggling closer to him. "I promise I won't tell Ron that you're such a softy."

"I appreciate that."

They fell lapsed into silence again, but unlike their earlier awkward pauses, this silence was comfortable and relaxed. Harry felt as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Feeling sleepy, he moved his hand in lazy patterns over her back.

“Hermione...” he began slowly. “When I was with Cho... were you, you know... jealous?”

Hermione shifted slightly to look up at his face. “Why?”

“Dunno,” Harry said. “Just curious.”

Hermione let out a tiny sigh. “Yes, Harry. I was jealous of Cho.”

“I didn’t... well, I didn’t really notice anything at the time...”

“Well...” Hermione looked hesitant. “I knew it wouldn’t last. You only liked her because was pretty and popular.”

“Did not!”

“I knew she’d never understand you,” Hermione said softly. “At least, not like I did. And you didn’t have the patience for her, either.”

It annoyed Harry that Hermione was right, as usual. “Oh. So. You were only a little bit—”

“Will you stop?” Hermione said testily. “Why does it matter? It’s in the past.”

“Yeah. Sorry,” Harry mumbled. He waited a beat. “So when I told you about our first kiss, it didn’t bother you?”

“Harry!”

“Sorry,” he said again, a bit sheepish. “I get it.”

Hermione pursed her lips and seemed to struggle with herself for a moment. “Harry?” she finally asked softly.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think...” she trailed off, avoiding eye contact. “Do you think that I’m... pretty?”

Harry stared at her for a moment, trying to figure out if she was serious. Deciding that she was, he said, “Of course I do, Hermione. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Oh, it’s just that...” she said vaguely, looking apprehensive. “Well...”

Beginning to feel a little bit suspicious, Harry narrowed his eyes at her. “You’re not fishing for compliments, are you? Because you know that I think you’re—”

“Harry, it’s not that!” Hermione cut in, eyes registering a bit of hurt. “I mean, I just... Cho was very... well, she was beautiful. And sometimes I just thought... I mean, I suppose I always thought that I would never... Oh...this is stupid...”

Harry began to realize that Hermione really was insecure and that this had clearly been something she had been keeping inside her for a while. Mentally berating himself for his insensitivity, he tilted her chin up so their eyes locked. “You thought what?” he prodded gently.

She swallowed with difficulty, the barest hints of a blush appearing on her face. “That, you’d never... if Cho was the kind of girl that you....” Hermione sighed. “I knew I’d never look like that.”

Her words finally out in the open, Hermione steadfastly looked away, her face growing brighter with embarrassment. “That’s not...” Harry began, feeling useless when it came to reassuring her. “You’re more than... Cho’s not... damn, what do you want me to say?”

“It’s okay, Harry,” Hermione said softly. “You don’t have to say anything. I’m just being logical. I’m not ugly, exactly, but I’m never going to win any kind of beauty contest...”

“There’s more to beauty than just hair or eye colour,” Harry interrupted, watching her face closely. “Beauty comes from how we

hold ourselves... the face we show the world. You have something that bubbles up from inside you, that lights up your eyes and your entire face. Like when you're talking about S.P.E.W. or when you're really angry with Ron. You're more than just... Cho Chang. You're... beautiful, Hermione. You are."

She sniffled quietly, pressing her face against his chest. "Really?"

"Of course," Harry answered immediately. "Not that I don't like certain aspects of your features, either. I like your lips very much. I also like your neck, very smooth. Have I mentioned how much I like your breasts yet?"

She giggled. "No."

"Your arse isn't too bad, either."

"Harry, shush," she said quietly. "You were doing very well."

They lapsed into silence and Harry's eyes, which had been growing increasingly heavy, threatened to close.

"Hermione..." he said, beginning to doze off. "You should get some sleep..."

"You mean you should get some sleep," she said teasingly.

"I'm serious," Harry said with a yawn. "You need some rest. I know you're worried, but I promise you, if my scar even twinges a little, I'll wake you up so quickly you won't know what hit you."

"I suppose..." Hermione said, sounding uncertain.

Harry waited all of about one minute. She dropped off, her light snores filling the empty hospital wing. Harry smiled softly to himself, allowing sleep to pull him in.

A/N: For those of you wondering, I have three more chapters written (I think... it could be four... depending on length...) and at least two more planned. The next couple of chapters I'm fairly happy with as is,

which is a rarity for me, so those updates should be coming soon. As usual, thank you for reading and leaving feedback. It's muchly appreciated.

The first thing that Harry realized when he woke up was that he wasn't alone. It wasn't because Hermione was still curled up in his arms. No, he felt the absence of her presence immediately. He could feel eyes on him, lots of eyes, and it made his skin prickle slightly. He stretched, surprised when he heard a little cry.

"He's awake! He's moving!"

"Molly, dear... give the poor boy a chance to open his eyes..."

Harry slowly opened his eyes, trepidation creeping over him. He nearly rolled on his glasses, which lay in a little heap next to his pillow. He pushed them up his nose, blinking in confusion at the crowd that was gathered around his bed.

Mrs. and Mr. Weasley, Lupin, Tonks, Mad-Eye, Hagrid, Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, and Madam Pomfrey were all staring down at him. Harry swallowed, feeling like he was some kind of ancient artifact on display.

"Hi..." Harry greeted hesitantly.

Mrs. Weasley, with a little cry, hugged him tightly. Harry flushed in embarrassment, though quite pleased by her obvious worry. She pulled away from him, studying him through narrowed eyes.

"When was the last time he had a decent meal?" she demanded loudly.

Then, Harry wasn't quite sure what happened, but everyone began talking at once.

"I assure you," Madam Pomfrey said loudly. "All my patients are properly taken care of!"

"Molly, dear, I'm sure Harry has more important things to worry about than his stomach..." Arthur Weasley attempted to say soothingly.

"Possession, eh?" Moody barked. "Never give them a moment, Potter! NEVER GIVE AN INCH!"

“Moody, please... like he could have prevented what happened!” Tonks admonished loudly.

Hagrid was trying in vain to blink back tears. “Knew yeh'd beat em in the end, Harry! What our Hermione did fer yeh... absolutely amazin'...”

Lupin just looked at him in concern. “Are you feeling alright, Harry?”

“I... uh... yeah...” Harry said, overwhelmed.

Dumbledore cleared his throat loudly, silencing the crowd around Harry's bedside immediately. “I know many of you are very concerned about Harry's health. Rest assured, he is doing remarkably well, given the circumstances.”

Madam Pomfrey sniffed. “It's remarkable, alright. Mr. Potter here seems to think himself exempt from the most basic of rules. There will be no sharing beds in this hospital wing!”

Harry blushed a deep crimson red and resisted the urge to ask where Hermione was. Instead, still blushing, he asked, “What time is it?”

“Middle of the afternoon,” Madam Pomfrey answered, still looking rather annoyed. “Slept straight through the morning and it isn't any wonder... I can only imagine how late you were up last night...”

Harry was blushing so deeply he was afraid his face might burst into flames. “That's, err....” He looked at Dumbledore pleadingly.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. “Breaking more school rules, Harry?”

“It's, you see... we were... nothing happened....”

“Hmmm,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully, but Harry was very much relieved to see that he switched the topic. “As you can see, Harry successfully managed to fight off Voldemort's newest attack...”

“An attack,” Moody cut in, “that should not have happened in the first place. Never give them an inch, Potter. Never leave yourself an opening.”

“I, err... thanks,” Harry answered weakly.

Hagrid clapped him on the shoulder. “Yeh're alright now, Harry.” His eyes glistened. “Gave us all quite a scare, but yeh're alright.”

“Yeah, I am. I mean...I'm fine...”

Madam Pomfrey sniffed again. “Hardly,” she said, looking at him shrewdly. “It's nothing a few more days of bed rest won't cure, but you are far from being fine.”

Harry began to sweat lightly. He appreciated all the concern, but it was exhausting.

Professor McGonagall seemed to take some kind of pity on him. “Perhaps,” she said crisply, “visitors should be admitted one at a time, so as not to overwhelm Mr. Potter.”

“Excellent idea, Minerva,” Dumbledore said immediately.

She fixed him with a piercing gaze. “It's a wonder why you didn't think of it first.”

“Old age, you know,” Dumbledore said easily. “One forgets these things.”

Moody hummed rather loudly, his fake eye staring intently at Harry. It made Harry squirm uncomfortably. “No need,” he said loudly. “I've seen my proof. Glad to have you back, Potter.”

Moody clunked loudly out of the hospital wing, and Harry stared after him, slightly dazed.

“Ahhh,” Dumbledore said serenely. “The trust that runs between longtime friends.”

Harry just stared at him.

“Moody didn't believe Dumbledore that you'd managed to overcome Voldemort's possession,” Tonks explained. “He wanted to check on you himself.”

“Oh... well, that was good of him.”

At that moment, Mrs. Weasley thrust a tray loaded up with food onto Harry's lap. “Eat up, Harry dear. You'll get some of your colour back...”

Harry stared at the food, feeling slightly queasy. The last thing he wanted to do was munch away while practically every person he'd ever met watched him. Seeing the eager look on Mrs. Weasley's face, however, Harry picked half-heartedly at the mashed potatoes.

Lupin put a reassuring hand on Harry's shoulder. “I'm proud of you, Harry,” he said quietly. “We all are.”

Harry gave Lupin a small smile, feeling a rush of gratitude. “Thanks... that means a lot.”

Lupin nodded at him and turned to go, bringing Tonks with him. Hagrid left, too, after several pointed looks and loud throat clearings from McGonagall.

Feeling like he had less of an audience, Harry dug more eagerly into the food Mrs. Weasley had scrounged up for him, feeling a sudden hunger burning away into his stomach.

Alone with the Weasleys, Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Madam Pomfrey (who continued to frown at him disapprovingly), Harry finally worked up enough courage to ask the question he'd been wondering since he'd awoken.

“Where's Hermione?”

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley exchanged a look.

"Class, Harry," Dumbledore answered calmly.

"Oh," Harry said, trying not to sound too disappointed.

Arthur Weasley cleared his throat, and paced rather nervously. "Harry..." he began hesitantly. "There's something you should know."

Harry set down his fork, his hunger going as quickly as it had come. "What?" he asked uneasily.

"The Ministry's very... distraught over what happened to you. The wizarding world is clambering for answers. And, well..." Arthur glanced at Dumbledore. "We didn't think it would be appropriate for us to make any statements without your consent."

"It's not their business!" Mrs. Weasley cut in shrilly. "What right do they have to harass him, Arthur? After all that he's been through..."

Arthur Weasley shook his head sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Harry," he said honestly. He let out a long sigh. "The longer the wizarding world goes without answers... the worse the questions become."

Harry stared down at his hands before nodding grimly. "Okay," he said.

He didn't miss the looks that the adults shared over his head.

"There are ways to go about it," Mr. Weasley continued gently. "Perhaps we can release some kind of statement to the press. Fudge is fairly eager to prove your innocence..."

Professor McGonagall glanced at Dumbledore, a slightly amused expression on her face. "I can't imagine why that would be. Albus?"

"No idea, Minerva," he said seriously. "None at all..."

"I'll give another interview," Harry said quietly. "I've done it before... with the Daily Prophet."

“Harry, dear, there is no need to let those...” Mrs. Weasley shuddered. “Those people profit from what happened to you. A simple statement, support from the Minister...”

“No,” Harry said sharply. “People will never believe it until they hear right from me.” He looked at them, determined. “I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“Very well, Harry,” Dumbledore said sadly. “Would you like me to be present again?”

Harry shook his head. “No, that’s okay. I have someone else in mind. Someone much more... intimidating.”

“Is that so?” Dumbledore said mildly, stretching. “Well, now that I’ve received such a generous compliment... coming, Minerva? I feel like a cup of tea. Perhaps mint would be nice...”

Minerva pursed her lips. “It’s good to have you back, Potter.”

Harry managed a small nod and she followed Dumbledore out of the room, walking somewhat stiffly.

Harry set his tray of food off to the side. He felt the old familiar headache brewing behind his forehead, making him wish desperately for Hermione.

Heavy-eyed, he blinked sleepily at the Weasleys. “Thanks for coming all this way for me.”

Mrs. Weasley patted his hand. “We were worried, dear.”

Harry yawned, feeling sleepy again. Madam Pomfrey eyed him suspiciously, watching him like a hawk. Harry shook his head, attempting to clear his mind.

The doors to the hospital wing burst open and Harry grinned as Ron and Hermione ran in, breathing heavily and looking slightly flushed.

"Dumbledore said you were awake!" Hermione said eagerly, approaching him. "We really wanted to see you... you know, before you fell asleep again..."

"How much sleep can he get, Hermione?" Ron asked, bemused. "It's all he's bloody done for the past week." And then, suddenly embarrassed, "Mum? Dad? What are you doing here?"

"Visiting Harry," Arthur Weasley answered. "You didn't think Molly would let them shut her out forever, did you?"

"Of course not," Hermione answered, smiling. "It's a perfectly understandable reaction."

Harry caught her eye and grinned. She smiled back, reaching his bedside and kneeling beside it.

"Well!" Mr. Weasley continued, clearing his throat slightly. "Work calls. Best of luck tomorrow, Harry."

Pecking his wife on the cheek, Arthur Weasley hurried off.

Hermione looked at Harry, eyes wide. "I'm sorry I wasn't here when you woke up."

"It's okay. Classes are more important..."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Not for me, they aren't. I told you, I'm weeks ahead of what they've been doing. However," Hermione opened her bag and dumped a large number of books on his lap. "I did collect all your assignments for you."

Harry goggled at the sheer number of books and parchments on his lap. He swallowed. "I... uh... thanks..."

Ron took one look at the pile of books on Harry's lap before collapsing in a fit of hysterical laughter.

Harry continued to gape at his homework assignments.

"You know you're still dangerously behind, Harry."

Ron finally gained control of himself. "Well I think that being possessed by You-Know-Who and landing in the hospital qualifies as a good excuse for not getting his work done, Hermione!"

Hermione glared at Ron. "Harry wants to catch up," she said witheringly. "Don't you, Harry?"

Harry glanced at Ron. Then he glanced back at Hermione. He shrugged.

Hermione looked furious. Harry gulped.

"Hermione," he tried soothingly. "It's not that I don't want to catch up... I just... I don't think I have the energy right now."

She peered at him through narrowed eyes, clearly suspicious. "Exams are coming up, Harry and if you have any desire to pass them at all—"

"Yeah, I know," Harry cut in, pre-empting a very familiar lecture. "Just give me some time, okay?"

Hermione still looked suspicious. "Okay, you have two days. I'll have to modify my schedule somewhat, but if you work hard, I think that we can fit it all in."

"Erm, yeah." Harry said, somewhat horrified that she already had a schedule drawn up for him. "Yeah... that sounds good..." Harry's eyes suddenly lit up. "Hey, you know what would be a really good reward for doing well?"

"Not getting kicked out of Hogwarts?"

Harry hated it when she had a point. Deflating slightly, he closed his eyes. "Yeah. That's a pretty good one, I guess."

Hermione leaned forward until she could whisper in his ear. "Honestly, Harry, it's not like we need an excuse to snog. If you want to kiss me... well, I probably wouldn't say no."

Harry's mind was nagging him on what "probably" meant when Mrs. Weasley cleared her throat. The three teenagers looked at her, having forgotten that she was still in the room. She looked near tears.

"Is it really true?" she asked, her eyes on Ron. "I've been trying not let myself get influenced by the papers—Merlin knows, nothing they write is ever true—but my son never bothers to update me..."

"It's true," Ron said immediately, shifting uncomfortably. "I have a girlfriend."

Whatever Mrs. Weasley had been expecting, it wasn't that. She stared at Ron for a moment, completely shell-shocked. Harry was having a similar reaction. Even Hermione looked surprised.

Ron blushed. "Well, you know how those papers can be misleading..." he trailed off and winked at Harry and Hermione before turning back to Mrs. Weasley. "Her name's Luna. She's a friend of Ginny's, Mum, I'm sure you've met her. We've been... seeing each other for a while now."

"Lovegood?" Mrs. Weasley questioned, sounding a little faint. "Oh, Ron... don't you think she's a little... not all there?"

Ron's blush increased. "Yeah, she's a little mad. So what?" he asked hotly. "We're all a little mad, when you get right down to it! She probably has the right idea! She doesn't bother to pretend or make excuses for what she is!"

Mrs. Weasley blinked at her son for a short amount of time before managing to get a hold on herself. Ron looked mortified when Mrs. Weasley gathered him up in a tight hug. "Oh, Ronald!" she wailed, loudly. "You're growing up so fast!"

"Mum," he hissed, face turning even redder. "Let go of me... Harry's watching... ow! That hurt! YOU HAVEN'T LET GO YET!"

Mrs. Weasley pulled away and attempted to smooth some of Ron's hair down. "My little Ronald... growing up so fast..."

"Yeah... that's right," Ron said. "So that's... the news. Luna and I are a... couple." At the word couple, Ron turned slightly green, looking a little sick.

Mrs. Weasley fussed over Ron for another moment before turning back to Harry and Hermione, looking distinctly warmer. "Well," she said, cheerfully. "I should probably be going, then. I'm glad to see that you're recovering quickly, Harry, dear. Good luck tomorrow."

As soon as Mrs. Weasley left the room, Ron threw himself into the armchair by Harry's bedside, still looking rather green. Harry and Hermione gaped at him in surprise.

"Bloody hell," he muttered. "I have a girlfriend. A girlfriend. I... dear Merlin..." Ron buried his face in his hands and moaned loudly.

Harry watched him in sympathy. "I hear you, mate. It definitely takes a while to sink in."

Hermione shot them both matching glares. "Oh, really?" she said icily. "Does it?"

In an attempt to distract her, Harry grinned at Ron widely. "So? When did it happen?"

Ron rubbed at his eyes. "I dunno!" he cried. "One moment we were enjoying a perfectly nice snog by the lake, under the full moon, next moment she pulled away and asked me if I was her boyfriend! What the hell was I supposed to say?"

Harry's feelings of sympathy increased. "Dear Merlin, I don't know. What did you say?"

"I said that of course I was! Next thing I knew she was crying! She blabbed on about how's she's liked me for years! And... then I was comforting her... and bloody hell! I have a girlfriend!"

"HONESTLY!" Hermione huffed loudly, tugging her hand out of Harry's grip. She stood up, looking furious. "You two are the most insensitive prats that I have ever had the misfortune to lay eyes on!"

Ron and Harry exchanged confused looks.

"Why?" they demanded, at the same time. "What did I do?"

Hermione whirled on Ron. "You!" she shrieked, pointing a finger in Ron's direction. "Playing with Luna's feelings that way! You knew how she felt about you! Of course she's your girlfriend! AND YOU WILL TREAT HER WITH ALL THE RESPECT THAT YOU CAN POSSIBLY MUSTER! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"

Ron's eyes were very wide. "Hermione, you know, you're really quite frightening—"

Ron made a choking noise when Hermione's eyes actually flashed at him. Ron leaned backwards in his chair and hastily said. "I announced it to my mum, didn't I? I like her, don't I? I comforted her, didn't I? Do you know what the sight of a crying girl does to me, Hermione? THAT MUST MEAN SOMETHING!"

Hermione glared at him for another moment before whirling on Harry. "And you!" she yelled, pointing a finger in his direction now. Harry wished that he had the strength to run away. "Was this how you felt when we first started going out? Is that why you were in such a bad mood?"

"I..." Harry squeaked out, nervous. "I... I love you..." he tried weakly.

Hermione's eyes softened, but she still looked at him rather coldly.

Harry felt himself growing desperate. "C'mon, Hermione. You know how I feel about you. This isn't fair... we're talking about Ron and Luna. Completely different subject!"

“And hey!” Ron said suddenly, sitting up straighter. “Shouldn't you be on your knees thanking me? I completely diverted mum from asking about the two of you!”

Hermione looked uncertain. “That's true...”

“Thanks, Ron,” Harry added.

Ron shook himself lightly before saying again, in a wondrous voice. “I have a girlfriend...”

“Yep,” Harry said cheerfully.

“I have a Luna...”

“Yep,” Harry said again.

Hermione made a vague sound of disgust in the back of her throat.

Harry, feeling like he was treading into dangerous territory, quickly said. “It's... having a girlfriend is well... it's a wonderful feeling, Ron. Really, it is. There's... you know, the snogging.”

“True,” Ron said, looking thoughtful.

“Disgusting pigs the lot of you,” Hermione muttered angrily. “I can't believe that's all you think a relationship's about...”

Harry, suddenly feeling that Hermione's words would be followed by her wand, shifted his eyes to her and smiled warmly. “Of course it isn't,” he said, trying to keep his tone light. “It's also about... being with the one person that understands you better than anyone else in the world. It's about knowing that you can tell them anything and they'll never judge you for it. It's about hurting when they are, smiling when they do. It's about... feeling empty when they're not around.”

“Oh... Harry...” Hermione sniffed. “That was beautiful.”

Ron looked disgusted. “That was nauseating! Hermione, what the bleeding hell have you done to him?”

Harry just grinned when Hermione sat back down at on the edge of his hospital bed and pressed her palm to his forehead. "Do you still hurt?"

"Oh... well... a little," Harry said, trying not to sound too hopeful.

"Really?" Hermione said softly. "What can I do to make it better?"

Harry feigned concentration. "I dunno, Hermione. It's... the pain takes a lot of energy, you know? It's hard for me to focus on anything else."

Her eyes clouded over in worry and she leaned closer to him. "So there's... nothing... I can do, then?"

"Well," Harry said. "There might be something."

He could feel her breath on his face now, her lips were so close that he could see her pink tongue nestled between her teeth. "What is that?" she whispered.

Harry let out a low moan of frustration. It was all the persuasion Hermione needed. She closed the distance between them and sighed happily as her lips met his. The kiss was short and sweet, as both were all too aware that Ron was still in the room. When Hermione pulled away, she found Harry's hand and settled herself comfortably on the bed next to him.

Ron was sitting rigid as a board, with one hand held over his eyes. "Are you two done yet?" When he received no answer, he slowly lowered his hand from his eyes and looked relieved to see that they were no longer kissing. He smirked widely, his eyes meeting Harry's. "So it really is all about the snogging."

Harry smirked back at him, glad that Hermione could no longer see him. "Ron! Whatever gave you that idea?" he said, in a scandalized voice.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Right. I can tell when I'm not wanted."

"You just want to go see Luna," Hermione replied knowingly.

"Yeah, remember," Harry added. "You're girlfriend."

Ron visibly twitched. "Shut up, Potter."

"Wow, this is really serious," Harry said, glancing at Hermione. "What do you think? See Ron going with her to Australia this summer to search for... I dunno... fish with arms?"

"Kangaroos with gills," Hermione said. "I can see things going in that direction."

Ron scowled. "Shut up."

"Snorckled hornhumps, perhaps?" Harry added.

"Crumple Horned Snorcacks!" Ron corrected immediately before clamping a hand over his mouth, looking horrified.

Harry and Hermione dissolved into a fit of laughter. Ron glared at them for a moment before stalking out of the room.

When Ron was gone, Harry focused back on Hermione. "So..." he said quietly. "How do you feel about doing me another favor?"

Harry was enjoying his breakfast when Madam Snow rushed into the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey looked less than delighted by this intrusion upon her patient, but Harry suspected that Dumbledore may have said something to her. In any case, Madam Snow looked gleeful when she dragged a chair next to Harry's bedside and pulled out her parchment and Quick-Quotes Quill.

Harry watched her, eyes widening when she appeared to be salivating.

"Potter," she said, an excited edge to her voice. "No Dumbledore here this time, hmm?"

Harry made a show of looking around. "Doesn't appear so."

Madam Snow leaned closer to him, her face breaking out into a huge smile. "He abandon you, Potter? Tired of sticking up for his star student? Afraid that you may have gone to the... dark side?"

"Actually," said Harry cheerfully. "It was because I asked him not to come."

Madam Snow raised a perfectly penciled eyebrow. "Hmm?" she said noncommittally. "Is that so?"

At that moment, Hermione rushed into the hospital wing, a load of books in her arms. "Oh, Harry!" she exclaimed, upon seeing him. "I'm not late, am I?"

Harry just grinned, seeing the shocked look on Madam Snow's face. "Nope," he said, happily. "Not late at all. Just in the nick of time." He turned his attention back to the reporter. "I hope you don't mind, but I asked Hermione to stay with me during the interview."

Hermione dumped the books on Harry's bed before leaning down to peck him on the cheek. She turned back around and frowned at Madam Snow. "I'm Hermione Granger, I believe we've met."

Madam Snow scowled darkly. Her eyes ticked slowly to Harry's face before settling back on Hermione's face. Some kind of light dawned in her eyes. "You... you two..." she said, excited, her annoyance at Hermione's appearance forgotten. "Back together, hmm?"

"Yes," Hermione answered, eyes narrowing when Madam Snow's quill began dancing across the parchment. "However, the purpose of this interview is for Harry to prove that he is not Voldemort, nor in league with Voldemort, so I hardly see this as an issue."

Madam Snow flinched. "Don't say his name, you stupid girl."

"Don't call her stupid," Harry said immediately, a warning edge to his voice.

Hermione smiled. "She's entitled to her own opinions." Smile widening, Hermione reached for one of the books she'd brought with her. She rifled through it. "Before we get started, I'm curious, how much are you planning on compensating Harry for this interview?"

"Compensating?" Madam Snow repeated, somewhat bewildered.

Harry, feeling confused himself, glanced at Hermione. She was too busy flipping through her book to pay him any mind.

"Well, yes, he will be dramatically boosting Prophet sales, will he not? It seems only fair that he receive something in return for it."

"You mean... like money?" Madam Snow asked, as if the concept was a new one for her.

"Well, sure," Hermione said. "If you're offering. I was thinking... I don't know... maybe ten percent of the profit?"

"Ten percent of the profit?" Madam Snow said shrilly, completely shocked.

Harry smirked and leaned back, prepared to let Hermione do all the work.

"You're right, it's not very much, is it? Considering the amount that you'll be making off this interview. Fifteen seems slightly more fair, perhaps."

"Potter agreed to this interview beforehand! There was no deal made for payment! It's promoting his self-interest! I refuse to give him a cent of what this paper makes!"

Hermione sniffed delicately and turned a page in her book. "Interesting..." she murmured. "Very interesting..."

Madam Snow leaned forward, looking annoyed as she did so. "What?"

“Apparently,” Hermione said slowly, eyes flicking down the page. “There are very strict rules regarding the privacy of minors in the wizarding world.”

Madam Snow took a step backwards, looking unsure. “Certainly, there are. However, Harry agreed to—”

“Yes, yes!” Hermione said, a bit impatiently, waving her hand in the air. “But the Prophet has written many, many articles without Harry's permission. Some of which haven't been flattering, and most of which have had to do with his personal life.” Hermione shut the book with a snap and threw it back down on the bed. “According to Minors' Rights that is in direct violation of several of our Ministry's own laws.”

Madam Snow was actually rendered speechless for a moment. “What... are you threatening me, my dear?”

Hermione just continued smiling. She picked up another book from the bed. Harry craned his neck to see the title, Violators of Wizarding Law. “It says here,” Hermione said mildly, flicking through the pages. “That violating the privacy of minors is a very serious crime, indeed. There are very hefty fines involved. As for repeated offenses...” Hermione gave a mock shudder. “Prison... suspension of one's job...”

Shutting that book, she tossed it on the bed and picked up another one. This one read, Wizarding Court Cases. “There's a story in here, Madam Snow, that's very interesting. It's about a reporter who was sued for violating the privacy rights of a child. It was one of the shortest cases in our history. How much do you think the reporter owed after its completion?”

Madam Snow swallowed and pretended to examine her nails. “Completely ridiculous... it does not matter... we are not doing anything illegal...”

“The reporter lost everything,” Hermione said, adding a sad note to her voice. “She's still paying that child back.” She handed the book off to Harry, who took it, watching her with his mouth slightly agape.

Hermione pulled out her wand and tapped it in her hand thoughtfully. "How much do you think we could make if we decided to sue, Harry?"

"Um," Harry said, feeling completely useless. "A lot of money?"

"At least," Hermione said, a predatory look on her face. "All those articles the Prophet has written about you. Remember when they claimed you were going mad last year? That wasn't very nice of them, was it?"

"No, not particularly. It was... downright hurtful, really. I think it left a mark."

Hermione humphed. "Scarring, was it?"

"Um, yeah. Sure."

"What do you want?" Madam Snow finally said, a resigned note to her voice. She sighed. "Name your price."

Hermione looked delighted. "Well, I think fifteen percent is reasonable, provided Harry has no objections."

"Sounds good to me," Harry said quickly.

"And," Hermione added. "We want a fair interview. If I so much as see one more word implying that my boyfriend has joined Voldemort, the Prophet will be hearing from me, I assure you."

"Of... of course..." Madam Snow answered, sounding faint.

Harry beamed at Hermione. "You said I was your boyfriend," he whispered to her.

She just looked at him. "Well, you are."

"Yes, but... you said in such a protective tone," Harry said, grinning. "It was nice. You should do it again."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him before frowning in Madam Snow's direction. "Believe me, Madam Snow, I will be making copies of everything you write before they appear in tomorrow's paper. I highly suggest that you forego anything that's likely to piss me off."

Madam Snow looked at Hermione balefully and stopped her fast moving quill with a small humph.

"Since," she said softly, still glaring at Hermione, "Harry will be receiving such... generous payment for this interview, I think it's only fair that we include a section on your relationship. Since you two are so..." she paused, apparently searching for the right word. "Cute."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Fine, that sounds fair to me. What d'you think, Harry?"

Harry stared at her. "What?" he managed. "I mean, yeah, if you want to... but why do you want to, exactly?"

"Well," she said, still watching Madam Snow through narrowed eyes. "I'm tired of receiving hate mail from the Harry Potter Fan Club."

"Harry Potter Fan Club!" Harry said, in a choked voice. "I have a... a fan club?"

"Brilliant," Madam Snow said. "A one-on-one feature on how Harry has not joined the dark side... about the love that saved him... about... about his life's only love pulling him back from the brink of darkness!"

Hermione cleared her throat uncomfortably. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves," she said faintly.

Madam Snow's quill was already scribbling madly away.

Harry looked at it in slight trepidation. He reached for Hermione's hand.

"This interview is going to be long and painful," he said softly. "Keep your wand out, she's very good at distracting you so you aren't sure what she's writing. Don't ever answer any of her questions."

“Harry,” Hermione said gently. “This is your interview, remember? Take your own advice.”

“Right, right...” he said quickly. “I’m just saying, you never know! She might try and mess us up by asking you a question...”

“Just be honest,” Hermione said softly, squeezing his hand. “Tell the wizarding world what they need to hear without jeopardizing too much.”

“Along with all the juicy details of our relationship,” he muttered. With a pained sigh, he turned to face the eager reporter. “It all starts 15 years ago, on the night that Voldemort first tried to kill me. That’s when he gave me the scar on my forehead, connecting us in a way no one, not even Dumbledore, could have predicted...”

Harry's final week in the hospital wing was a complete blur. He remembered the two-hour interview with Madam Snow, but he couldn't remember much of what actually ended up going in the article. However, Dumbledore claimed that the wizarding world was reassured, and Ron told him that he'd been elevated back to "hero status." He even won Witch Weekly's most charming smile award. Hermione assured him that he did, in fact, have quite a disarming grin and it always managed to reduce her to a great big pile of goo. That declaration was followed by a very hearty snog-fest, as well as several other things that Harry blushed thinking about.

He spent most of his time sleeping. Doing even the simplest of spells exhausted him. This, of course, only furthered Hermione's resolve to completely catch him up come exams. When they weren't kissing (and they were spending quite a lot of time kissing), Hermione was making him copy down notes and write papers so, by the time he was strong enough to do magic again, he wouldn't be too far behind. Predictably, Ron was finding the entire thing hilariously funny.

For his part, Harry was pretty sure he was nearing the stage where he would have jumped off a cliff had Hermione asked him to. This scared him, in no small part because it meant he was opening up to her in a way he never had before. The old fears grabbed him at the oddest moments, constantly reminding him that if losing her would have been terrible before, now it was inconceivable.

"Trying to kill you... bloody mad, she is..."

Harry snapped to attention, raising his eyes from the book he was reading. Hermione was off trying to finish some of her own work, plus prefect duties she'd been ignoring, and had left Ron with him in hopes that the red-head would continue to force Harry to study. Harry was very certain Hermione had made a very bad judgment call.

Ron was currently staring at Harry's pile of books, a look of clear revulsion on his face. "Oi, Harry! You know, she managed to sneak Hogwarts: A History in here. Bloody hell. Mate, I hate to be the bearer of bad news... but I think she's trying to kill you..."

Harry glanced at his books, feeling an odd sort of urgency in his stomach. "Well, you know, Ron, I'm still so far behind. I'll never catch up in time for exams. Plus Hogwarts: A History is actually a quite fascinating read, when you get right down to it. There's loads of information in it—"

Ron cleared his throat loudly. "Harry, I think you're beginning to channel Hermione. This is very disturbing."

Harry blinked at him a few times before shutting the book he was frantically trying to read. He leaned back against his pillows, feeling somewhat sheepish. "Dear Merlin," he breathed. "You're right... since when have I cared so much about exams? Since when has Hogwarts: A History ever been interesting?"

Ron made a vague note of disgust in the back of his throat. "Um, let's see. How long since your touching reunion with Hermione?"

Harry glared at him. "No, no way! I'm my own person! I'm completely separate from Hermione! This is just... coincidence! After effects from being possessed by Voldemort!"

"Too much snogging with your girlfriend..."

With a blush, Harry shut his mouth. Ron gave him a knowing look.

"Yep," Ron said, looking somewhat haughty. "You've become pathetic, you no longer think for yourself, you have no free thoughts—"

"Ron," Harry interrupted testily. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Ron picked up Hogwarts: A History and waved it in front of Harry's face. "She has you reading Hogwarts: A History, Harry! WAKE UP! THIS IS NOT NORMAL BEHAVIOUR FOR YOU!"

Harry snatched at the book. "Be careful with it, Ron," he hissed. "Hermione would kill me if anything happened to it..."

Ron raised his eyebrows.

Harry blanched.

Carefully, Harry set the book back down on the floor.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered.

Ron shook his head. “Merlin, Hermione must be one good kisser...”

Harry glared at him. “I’ve just been...in the hospital wing too long. You never know what’s in those potions Madam Pomfrey gives you. Once I’m out of here, things will go back to normal. I’ll play Quidditch and chess and... and I’ll stop studying so much! ”

“Uh huh,” Ron said, clearly not believing him. “If you start knitting elf hats, I reserve the right to turn you over to You-Know-Who.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Ron, if I start knitting elf hats, I’ll turn myself over to Voldemort.”

Ron shook his head ruefully. “Just so long as I don’t have to watch the pair of you be just friends again.”

Harry merely grinned. Trying to look casual, he said, “So... how are things going with Luna?”

Ron shrugged. “I’m going to Australia with her this summer.”

Harry gasped. “Really?”

Ron grinned. “No.”

Harry laughed. “C’mon Ron,” he needled. “Tell me about your feelings.”

“Strangely enough, I feel like hitting you right now.”

“That’s a good start. Remember, just be honest with me and we can get through it.”

“Har har,” Ron muttered. “I knew I was going to regret trying to get you to open up...”

“Ron,” Harry said seriously. “I really want to know. How are things going with her?”

Ron stared at him for a moment. “I like spending time with her,” he finally said quietly. “Yeah, she’s a little... mad. But I feel like there’s... there’s a reason for it, you know? I always feel like she’s just a little out of my reach. Whenever she tells me something I feel like she’s leaving something out and I want desperately to know what it is. She’s... smart, Harry. Really smart. Not like Hermione, more... more, I dunno, naturally smart, if there’s such a thing. She sees the world differently than the rest of us. I don’t really... I don’t really know what to make of it.”

“She’s been through a lot,” Harry said softly. “I respect her a lot for it.”

Ron sighed. “It’s hard sometimes. I’ll be honest, I’m not completely over Hermione. But I don’t think things would have ever worked out between us. Can you imagine? Hermione forcing me to catch up on my schoolwork? We’d bloody kill each other.”

Harry gave him a ghost of a smile. “And I’m not going to lie to you either, Ron. It’s really not so painful to have Hermione as a tutor.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “For you, maybe. All you have to do is flash the World’s Most Charming Smile at her and she melts into your arms.”

Harry coughed slightly, feeling his cheeks heat up. “That’s... hardly the point.”

“Hmmm,” Ron muttered, glancing down at *Hogwarts: A History* again. “At least we don’t have to worry about you flunking out anymore.”

“I s’pose...”

“Though, the chances of you actually completing an entire Quidditch season are up in the air...”

Harry felt a little sick. "That's hardly comforting."

"Yep," Ron said, a little proudly. "It wasn't meant to be." Off Harry's look, he hastened to explain. "I'm still working through my jealousy issues."

"Right," Harry muttered. "Then, I guess... well, you probably wouldn't cry if you thought I was... I dunno... dead or something."

Ron's eyes widened. "What? Who told you that?"

Harry tried to look innocent. "Told me what? Are you... Ron! Are you admitting to something?"

Ron picked up *Hogwarts: A History* and chucked it at him. "I'm going to kill her," he hissed. "I'm going to murder her."

"Good," Harry said, rubbing at his chest where *Hogwarts: A History* had hit him. "Because then she won't have a chance to kill me for..."

"Kill you for what?"

Harry and Ron jumped and turned to look at the doorway. Hermione was frowning at them, a speculative look on her face.

"Nothing," Harry said quickly. He searched his brain for something to distract her. "How were your prefect rounds?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and approached his bedside. "I found Pansy Parkinson and Malfoy going at it again in the Room of Requirement." Hermione sighed. "Not that I could do anything about it—Malfoy's a prefect."

Ron nodded blankly. "Yeah, Luna and I once..." Harry gave a small cough and Ron's eyes widened. Clearing his throat, Ron looked pleadingly at Hermione. "You were saying..."

"That leaving my prefect duties to you, Ron, was somewhat of a mistake!" Hermione snapped.

“So...” Harry cut in casually. “What you’re saying is... if you’re a prefect... you can get away with shagging in the Room of Requirement?”

Ron’s flush increased. “Well, I wouldn’t know anything about it!”

“Depends on what you’re saying, Harry,” Hermione said, staring at him through narrowed eyes.

“Well, I just think it’s interesting,” Harry continued, avoiding her eyes. “Since, you know, you just happen to be a prefect and all. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I refuse to kiss you anywhere near any of Malfoy’s bodily fluids!” Hermione shrieked. “Do you hear me?”

“Quite well, actually.”

“So,” Hermione continued cheerfully. “What am I going to kill you for?”

“Erm...”

“We weren’t talking about you,” Ron interrupted suddenly. “We were talking about Ginny.”

“Ginny?”

“Yes, Ginny,” Ron continued, face impassive. “Still upset that we had to forfeit that Quidditch match, you know. She’s taking it quite hard.”

Hermione frowned. “Well,” she said scathingly. “That was hardly Harry’s fault now, was it? It wasn’t like he chose to become possessed by Voldemort!”

Ron held up his hands. “Hey, I don’t blame him! Ginny’ll get over it. It was just... such a disappointment for her.”

“Disappointment?” Hermione said shrilly. “Then what was it when Harry was possessed?”

“Hermione,” Ron said, sounding annoyed. “I told you, I don’t blame Harry at all! This is about Ginny...”

Glad that Ron was bailing him out, Harry yawned sleepily. He leaned back against the pillows and closed his eyes, letting the sounds of Hermione and Ron’s gentle bickering wash over him...

He was walking down a long path. It was a path that he hadn’t ever been on before and didn’t have any memories of. It trailed through the woods, dipping under long trees and passing brooks and streams. It was hot, Harry could feel little beads of sweat collecting at the bottom of his spine. Unconsciously, he swiped at his forehead. His face was clammy and wet, but his scar burned under his hand.

He ripped his hand away, eyes searching the woods suspiciously. Only the sounds of birds chirping reached his ears.

He continued along the path. The sun shone down through the trees, creating little pools of light. He watched the ground as he walked, feeling like he was doomed to go endlessly on. He was certain that there was somewhere very important that he had to be.

He kept going, and eventually reached a small clearing in the woods. There was Hagrid’s hut, nestled in the trees. Fang was lying curled in a ball outside the door.

He squinted at it, bewildered. What was Hagrid’s hut doing in the middle of his path?

Harry was suddenly aware of loud chopping noises. Curious, he ventured further into the clearing, following the noise. He made his way behind the hut, pausing in surprise as he did so.

Hagrid and Ron were chopping wood. Hagrid was using the same axe he used for the Yarmuchs. Ron kept placing large logs in front of

him, which Hagrid would promptly cut through. They didn't seem to be aware that Harry was watching them.

Finally, Harry approached them. "Ron, Hagrid...what are you doing here?"

Ron glanced at him, bored. "I dunno, Harry. It's your dream, after all. What are we doing here?"

Harry frowned. "I don't... I'm dreaming?"

Hagrid laughed, a deep sound that seemed to emanate up from his belly. "Course yeh are, Harry!"

"Well, then..." Harry said uncertainly. "I s'pose I was getting lonely."

Ron swapped at a mosquito that landed on his arm. He picked up another log for Hagrid to chop. "Lonely, Harry? Is that how you feel? C'mon, you can tell me. Best friends, right?"

"I... sometimes, I guess. I mean... I am alone, aren't I?"

Hagrid's axe split the log of wood in two with a dull thud. "Yeh're not alone, Harry," he said reassuringly, wiping sweat off his brow. "Yeh'll always have Hermione and Ron with yeh."

Ron grinned. "That's right, Harry. We'd do anything for you, you know that."

"Yeah... I guess..." Harry answered, feeling dubious.

Ron picked up another log of wood for Hagrid to chop. He frowned, appearing deep in concentration. "Look, Harry. I know I can be a jealous prat sometimes, but that hardly means I'd let you die alone."

Harry absentmindedly touched a hand to his cheek. He swallowed. "But... it's my responsibility to fight Voldemort..."

"Yeh'd better move on, Harry," Hagrid said, a warning note to his voice.

Harry glanced back at the path, feeling reluctant. "I don't really know where I'm going, Hagrid."

Hagrid and Ron were too focused on chopping wood to notice that he'd said anything.

Harry, feeling increasingly bewildered, slowly made his way back to the path. Soon Hagrid's hut had faded into the distance. The day was growing increasingly hot, and Harry was glad for the shade the canopy of trees provided for him.

Some indefinite amount of time later, he stumbled upon a small creek. It crossed over his path, and the water twinkled in the patches of sunlight. Jagged rocks stood out, the water flowing over and through them. Harry crouched desperately in front of it, his mouth feeling dry and scratchy.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you."

Harry glanced up sharply, eyes settling on Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan. They were sitting on the other side of the creek, a game of Wizarding Chess spread out between them.

"What's wrong with the water?" Harry asked them, glancing at the creek suspiciously.

Dean Thomas shrugged. "I don't know, Harry. That's sort of the problem, isn't it?" Dean looked at the chess game. "It's your move."

Seamus shook his head. "I've always hated chess, never been much good at it, I'm afraid. Is Ron around, Harry? He'd probably be loads of help."

Harry jerked his shoulder. "Yeah, I just passed him. He seemed awfully busy, though."

"Chopping wood again?" Seamus inquired, sounding indifferent.

"Yeah."

"That's all he ever does, nowadays," Dean said sadly. "It's still your move."

"I don't know, Dean. I feel like every move would be the wrong one."

Harry glanced at the chessboard and was somewhat horrified to see that the pieces were all lined up in their starting positions.

"Why is Ron so busy chopping wood with Hagrid?" Harry asked, stepping over the brook.

"Well, you know," Seamus said. "He doesn't really have anything better to do."

"What d'you mean?" Harry said, with a frown.

Seamus and Dean looked at each other. "It's still your move," Dean said irritably.

Harry glared down at the board. "Neither of you have moved yet!" he snapped. "Just move a pawn, Seamus! I promise that won't make you lose the game!"

Seamus pondered that quietly for a moment. Shrugging, he moved a pawn, gaping at it when nothing earth shattering happened. "Thanks, Harry!" he said happily.

"I guess it's my move now," Dean said, sounding somewhat miserable by the prospect.

"Why is Ron chopping wood?" Harry asked again. "Why won't he come with me?"

"Because you don't need him anymore," Seamus explained, as if speaking to a child. "You could try moving a pawn, Dean. It seemed to work for me."

"But..." Harry said, confused. "But... but I do!"

Dean and Seamus both turned to look at him now, angry frowns on their faces.

“Harry, do you mind?” Seamus said. “We’re trying to play a game here!”

“Yeah,” Dean added. “It’s kind of hard to concentrate with you yammering on.”

Frustrated, Harry glared down at them. “A game?” he said, incredulous. “You’re not playing a game! You’re just staring blankly at that stupid board!”

“Well, what would you know about it, Harry?” Dean snapped. “You’ve never won a game of Wizarding Chess before.”

“Fine,” Harry said, through gritted teeth. “Will you just tell me what’s gotten into Ron?”

“Harry, we don’t know,” Seamus explained. “This is your mind, remember?”

“U.R.S.T.” Dean said, knowingly. “Poor, poor Ron.”

Harry stared at Dean. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“We were wrong,” Seamus said sadly, pointing at the board. “It’s your move, Dean.”

“I’m thinking!” Dean declared angrily.

Harry, deciding that he wouldn’t be getting any straight answers out of them, moved on. He followed the path along a sharp bend, wishing that he hadn’t listened to Dean’s warning and taken a drink of water. His throat was awfully dry.

The path curved upwards, and Harry followed it. The trees thinned and the sun beat down on his head. The path became dustier and he kicked up little tufts of sand with his feet. Though he was tired, Harry

increased his pace, certain that there was somewhere important he had to be.

At the top of the hill, Harry paused, taking in a deep breath. He touched his side, feeling a stitch slicing into his stomach. He wished that he could find some shade.

He heard a small peal of laughter, coming just off the path. He glanced in the direction of the sound, seeing a circle of cedar trees. Eyebrows crinkling in interest, Harry stepped off the path and approached the circle of trees.

The sounds of laughter increased. It was a high-pitched noise and sounded oddly familiar. Harry ducked under the branch of the first cedar tree, jaw-dropping in surprise at the image that greeted him.

Dobby and Dumbledore sat cross-legged on the ground, a good ten feet away from each other. They were rolling a large beach ball back and forth between each other, something that was making Dobby shake with giggles.

Harry watched in dumb fascination for a moment before clearing his throat. Dumbledore looked up, eyes crinkling in greeting. "Harry," he said warmly. "What brings you here?"

Harry stared. "I don't know, really..."

Dobby squeaked nervously as the ball rolled to a stop in front of him. "Must not stop Headmaster, Dumbledore, Sir. Must not stop."

Dumbledore turned his attention back to Dobby. "Quite right, Dobby. Carry on."

Dobby rolled the ball towards Dumbledore. "Dobby is very happy to see you Harry Potter, Sir. Dobby has been very worried about Harry Potter's health."

"I'm, uh, fine, Dobby. I'm feeling much better now."

Dumbledore nodded. "That's reassuring, Harry. You don't have very much time left."

Harry's head was spinning. "Time until what?"

Dumbledore passed the beach ball back to Dobby. "To get to where you're going, of course."

"Where I'm going..." Harry repeated, in confusion. "Professor, I don't know. I don't know where I'm going."

Dobby shook his head sadly. "But you is the Boy Who Lived, Sir!"

"Well, I didn't mean to be the Boy Who Lived!" Harry burst out. "I'm no different from anyone else!"

"But you are, Harry," Dumbledore said, with uncharacteristic seriousness.

Harry stepped closer to him. "Are you sure?" he demanded. "I don't have any special powers or skills! I'm just... a regular wizard! I'm no more powerful than you! Why can't you defeat Voldemort?"

Dobby shuddered. "Harry Potter must defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named! There is no one else, Sir!"

"Look inside yourself, Harry," Dumbledore cautioned gravely, eyes on the rolling beach ball.

"Look inside myself?" Harry exploded. "Look inside myself? What kind of advice is that?"

"That, Harry," Dumbledore said calmly, accepting the beach ball from Dobby and sending it back towards him. "Is the best advice I can offer you."

"Well, Professor," Harry snapped. "It's not very good advice."

"Careful Headmaster, Dumbledore, Sir," Dobby squeaked nervously. "That one came dangerously close to rolling away."

“That it did, Dobby. That it did.”

Harry stared at them for another moment before moving back to the path. “He’s insane,” Harry muttered under his breath. “Look inside myself, he says!”

Back at the path, Harry was relieved to find that the temperature had cooled down somewhat. It worried him, however. It meant that the day was beginning to end. He remembered what Dumbledore had said. His time was running out.

Time to what?

Shaking his head, Harry descended the hill. At the bottom, the path became smoother, the dust and sand replaced the dried mud. Small cracks and erosions had been woven into the mud with time.

There was a slight breeze now and the sweat trickling down his back felt cooler. His messy hair rustled untamed around his face. He brushed his bangs out of his eyes, peering ahead of him. The path curved on, undaunted.

He took a sharp turn and stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes landed on the figure of Luna Lovegood, standing just next to the path. She was staring intently up at the sky, one hand held over her eyes to shield her vision from the sun.

Harry made his way over to her, eager to see what she was looking at. Coming to a stop at her elbow, he heard her speaking, though she did not turn to look at him.

“He’s really improving, isn’t he?”

Harry was about to answer when Ginny and Neville stepped out of the woods to stand beside her. Like Luna, they both looked intently up at the sky, hand held over their eyes.

“He really is,” Ginny said, some pride leaking into her voice.

“Wish I could do that,” Neville said glumly.

“Who’s improving?” Harry asked loudly.

“Why, Ron, of course!” Luna said, still staring up at the sky.

Harry looked up as well, letting out a gasp of surprise when his eyes fell upon his red-head friend. He was riding his Cleansweep 7 broomstick, though Harry could see he was doing quite badly. He was facing in the wrong direction and, as a result, his broom bucked wildly beneath him, sending Ron into jerky circles and jumps.

“Absolutely brilliant on that thing,” Ginny said, sounding amazed. “Talent such as that...”

Ron grinned down at them, holding on tightly as his broom jerked and twitched in the sky. “Hello, Harry!” he called. “How’s the walk going?”

Harry stared at him. “Ron... what are you doing?”

“Practicing, of course!” Ron said, sounding scandalized. “What does it look like I’m doing, Mr. Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team?”

“Weasley is my king...” Luna hummed reverently under her breath.

Ginny looked startled. “Luna, please! That’s my brother up there!”

Harry shook his head. “Ron, get off there! I need your help!”

Ron flapped around wildly on his broom. “What are you talking about, Harry?”

“Ron, c’mon! I don’t know where I’m going and... it’d be really nice to have some company!” Harry dropped his voice. “I think I’m going to face Voldemort...”

Ron huffed out a breath. “Harry, can’t you get Hermione to go with you? I’m just a little bit busy at the moment.”

Harry stared at him helplessly. “I haven’t seen Hermione yet, Ron.”

"Well, I'm sure she's around somewhere. You two haven't been very far apart these days."

"Maybe," Harry answered, feeling unsure. "But I just... I don't want you to think that I don't need you."

"Why would I think that?"

"Stop distracting him!" Ginny hissed. "He's showing us all what he can do!"

"Yeah," Neville added, glowering at Harry. "Talent like this, Harry. You should be taking notes."

Ron's broom swerved dangerously back and forth beneath him. Luna let out a soft, "Ooooh..." and stared at him with rapt attention.

"Okay, Ron," Harry said, frowning. "If you're having fun..."

"Hey, Luna!" Ron said. "Watch this!"

The broom jerked up and down in sharp descents and ascents, causing Ron to hold on so tightly his knuckles turned white. Luna clapped her hands and jumped up and down.

"Brilliant, Ron!" she yelled out. "You're my hero!"

Ron blushed and beamed down at them. "Go on, Harry," he prodded. "I'm fine."

"Well... if you're sure..."

In answer, Luna, Neville, and Ginny moved in front of him, shouldering him out of the way. His view of Ron effectively blocked, Harry sighed and turned his attention back to the path.

He was lonely and he felt slightly hurt that Ron was too busy showing off to go along with him. He'd never abandoned him before (besides

that one time in fourth-year) and Harry wondered why practicing for Quidditch suddenly became so much more important.

And where was Hermione, anyway? He pondered that inexplicable question for a moment, missing her presence fiercely. If anyone had an explanation for what was going on, it would be her.

Lost in thought, he continued along the path. The path became rockier, sharp pebbles and stones wormed their way through the sole's of his shoes and pinched at his feet. Harry winced, but continued on, Dumbledore's warning continuing to echo ominously in his mind.

The day was getting darker, the shadows from the trees lengthening and flowing across the path. Compared to the heat of the early day, Harry felt quite chilled and he rubbed his arms.

Stopping for a moment to catch his breath, he heard the soft murmur of voices. He froze, his insides tightening up. He knew who those voices belonged to...

Feeling slight trepidation and slight excitement, Harry crept forward. He could just see the green tip of a large umbrella poking up from behind a grove of trees. Veering off the path, Harry brushed tree branches out of his way in an eagerness to see the people belonging to the voices.

When he found them, he stopped again, completely speechless as he stared in wonder. There, sitting calmly at a small, glass table were his parents and Sirius. They were smiling and joking with one another, drinking cups of tea and munching on biscuits.

Harry swallowed, unable to move.

His mother looked up at him, and Harry felt tears prick the back of his eyes. She smiled warmly at him and held out a hand.

"James," she said, nudging him. "Look who it is."

His father was looking at him now, face split into a wide grin. "Harry!" he said, sounding delighted. "We were wondering when you'd show up."

"Come, Harry," his mother said warmly. "There's a cup of tea here waiting for you."

Suddenly weak with emotion, Harry was surprised when his legs managed to carry him over to the table. He sunk gratefully into the chair next to Sirius, reaching for his cup of tea as he did so.

Sirius turned to look at him, and Harry was struck by how young and handsome his godfather looked. Gone were the sunken eyes of Azkaban, the unshaven look. Sirius looked clean, filled, and happy.

"Harry," he greeted. "It's good to see you again."

Harry just nodded, feeling a large lump gather in his throat.

"How are you doing, Harry?" his mother questioned, staring at him intently.

"Aww, come on, Lily, how do you think he's doing?" Harry's father said softly.

Harry finally managed to unglue his tongue long enough to say. "I'm doing... okay."

The three adults shared a long, concerned look.

Harry stared at them, feeling the familiar self-pity worm its way into his mind. This, this is what he'd never had. He'd never had parents to share his life with. There'd never been anyone to comfort him when he fell down and scraped his knee, no one to beat up the school bullies for him, no one to help him with homework or read his report cards...

Sitting next to Sirius was another painful reminder of how Harry had lost the closest thing he'd had as a parent. It was the lost time that made Harry suffer more than anything else. He'd never been able to

spend any lengthy amount of time with Sirius, first he'd been in Azkaban, and then he'd been an outlaw.

And now they were all here, right next to him, and he knew that it wasn't real, that it was just a dream, but it felt real, and that's really what mattered most. There was so much that he wanted to say, so many questions that he wanted to ask, but he couldn't seem to voice any of them.

Lily smiled at him, a warm smile that Harry could practically feel. "We know, Harry," she said simply.

Harry felt a surge of relief. He was reminded of his earlier thirst, and eagerly took a sip of tea, the liquid warm soothing as it slid down his throat. He set his mug down, a little disconcerted to see all three adults staring at him.

"I, uh... I have a girlfriend," Harry shared, feeling like he had to say something.

Sirius sighed. "It's not that Chang girl, is it?"

Harry just shook his head, wondering why he'd brought it up in the first place. Then, it hit him. He'd needed, wanted, to share the news with people that would care and be genuinely happy for him. Telling his parents and godfather suddenly seemed like the most natural thing in the world.

"Hermione," he said quietly, watching Sirius for a reaction.

Something in Sirius' eyes flickered and he broke out into a radiant grin. "Well, I'm glad that you finally woke up and realized what was right in front of you."

Harry grinned back. "Yeah, things have been... well, downright difficult, actually. Ron's been mad with jealousy, though I think he's beginning to work through that. We broke up for a while... but that didn't really work out too well. Then Voldemort possessed me and... you probably don't really want to hear about that," he added hastily.

"Tell us about her," Lily prompted soothingly.

"I, err... okay," Harry said. "She's really bright, the brightest witch in our grade, at least. She's Muggle born, but she knows loads more about the Wizarding world than I do—probably more than Ron does. She's read Hogwarts: A History at least a thousand times. She's very proactive, she created an organization for the treatment of elves named S.P.E.W. She's..." Harry trailed off. "She's my best friend, but she's... she's so much more than that, really."

Lily and James exchanged a look. "This is really quite sickening," James said lightly. "I think you might be drooling, Harry."

Harry blushed and stared very hard at the table.

"Come off it, James," Sirius said, sounding a little gruff. "The way you used to trail around after Lily..."

Lily's eyes twinkled. "Was there trailing, Harry?"

"No," Harry said, blush increasing. "It just sort of... happened."

"Well, she sounds like a wonderful girl," his mother continued, smiling, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "I wish we could've met her."

Harry felt a lump lodge in his throat. He nodded. "Me, too."

"Harry, you know," Sirius said, quietly. "You don't have a lot of time. Do you know where you're going yet?"

Harry just shook his head, feeling miserable. He could feel the warm tea settling in his stomach, making him feel tired and lethargic. He'd already gone so far, he didn't want to continue. He didn't want to leave...

"Can't I stay here?" Harry found himself pleading, a desperate tone to his voice. "Can't I just... sit here? With you?"

"Harry," his father said quietly. "You know that's not possible."

“Why not?” he burst out furiously. “I know this isn’t real! I know this is all figment of my imagination! But you know what? I don’t care! I don’t want to go down that stupid path where I’m alone and...” Harry trailed off, feeling the sudden burst of emotion leave him. “And I don’t know where I’m going.”

“Oh, Harry,” his mother said, sounding emotional. “I know... but you must. You can’t stay here with us, much as we want you to.”

Harry wiped at his eyes. “It’s not fair. It’s not... it’s that damn prophecy. You all died because of some bloody prophecy! You all died because of—”

“What, Harry?” Sirius said sharply.

Harry stared down at his hands. “Because of me.”

Harry expected them to deny it. He expected them to tell him that he shouldn’t blame himself. He expected them to say that they’d been fighting a war—that it had nothing to do with him.

So, naturally, he gave a jump of surprise when his father banged a fist on the table. The cups of tea rattled dangerously, the biscuits slid off the plate. Harry stared at him, taken aback.

“You’re damn right we died because of you,” he practically growled. “And we’d do it again in a second. That’s what being a parent means, Harry. It means doing anything to keep your child safe.”

Harry blinked rapidly, feeling his heart flutter in his chest.

“That’s what love is, Harry,” his mother said gently. “You musn’t blame yourself. All three of us knew what we were doing.”

“My only regret is that I abandoned you,” Sirius said softly. “Again.”

“Shush, Sirius,” Lily said. “You did the best you could, given the circumstances.”

"We're proud of you, Harry," his father said. "Every day. Don't ever forget that."

"I... uh..." Harry stuttered, overcome with too much emotion to put into words. He stood up. "Thank you."

The three of them smiled at him and Harry backed away slowly, watching as they continued to wave at him until he made his way back to the path. Once there, he turned, planning on running, when he ran smack into someone.

Harry took a step backwards, feeling slightly dizzy, to find that he'd collided with Ron.

Ron shot him a disgruntled look and rubbed at his forehead. "Bloody hell, Harry. Watch where you're going."

Harry blinked at him. "Ron? What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you. I was almost ready to give up, too, when you came flying out of the woods like a bat out of hell."

Harry, reminded about why he was so desperate to get moving, started jogging, eager to get away from the ghosts of his parents and his godfather. Ron followed him, matching his pace easily.

"Ron," Harry said slowly. "I thought you were too busy practicing for Quidditch."

Ron flashed an easy grin. "C'mon, Harry! Quidditch practice doesn't go on forever, you know. I would've been here earlier, but Seamus and Dean distracted me."

"Oh," Harry answered. "How's their chess game going?"

Ron frowned. "I dunno, Harry. I don't reckon they really knew what they were doing. I had to make every move for them, and it wasn't much fun, playing against myself. I kept winning and losing at the same time. It was very confusing."

Harry slowed his pace, beginning to get out of breath. "Ron, what are you really doing here?"

Ron shot him a disgruntled look. "I thought that was obvious. I promised to stand beside you, didn't I?"

"Well, yeah..." Harry replied, frowning. "But..."

Ron clapped him on the back and Harry had to beeline forward to prevent his glasses from falling off. "Harry, you needed me. So I came. Just accept it. Remember, this is your dream."

"Yeah, I know that," Harry said, with some frustration. "But it's really quite a strange dream, wouldn't you say?"

Ron snorted. "Harry, this is your head... of course it's a strange dream."

Harry frowned at him as they continued on, walking side by side. "I ran into Dumbledore and Dobby earlier. Dumbledore gave me some odd advice."

Ron grunted. "Dumbledore? Give odd advice? Whatever would give you that idea?"

"He said... he said that I had to 'look inside myself.' That... that's how I was supposed to defeat Voldemort."

Ron shook his head in disgust. "What kind of a crap advice is that?"

Harry nodded, feeling grateful for Ron's reaction. "Yeah, it was kind of odd."

"Odd?" Ron snorted. "It's... it's giving non-advice, is what it is! You know, Harry... I think it's Trewlaney advice. No matter what, you can always tell someone to look inside themselves. Oh, having girl problems, are you? Well, look inside yourself for the answer."

Harry snickered. "Yeah, I suppose."

“Completely mad Dumbledore is. Great wizard, but completely mad.”

Harry sighed. “I just wish he would give me some real answers for once.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that Dumbledore might not have any of the answers you’re looking for?” Ron shrugged faintly. “After all, he really is only human.”

Harry pondered that quietly for a moment. “Yeah, but... if Dumbledore doesn’t have the answers... then who does?”

“Dunno.” Ron thought a moment before grinning cheekily. “Have you tried looking inside yourself?”

“You were more help when you were riding your broomstick backwards,” Harry muttered.

Ron snorted. “C’mon, Harry. You’re just jealous. Did you see how happy it made Luna?”

“Uh huh,” Harry responded noncommittally.

“So...” Ron said slowly, looking eager to change the subject. “Have you found Hermione yet?”

“No. But I haven’t really been looking for her. Why?” he asked, somewhat suspicious. “Have you seen her?”

Ron stared at him, an unreadable look in his eyes. “Well... that’s a bit strange, don’t you think?”

“Strange?” Harry repeated, feeling his stomach bottom out. “Why would that be strange?”

“Well...” Ron continued, looking hesitant. “It’s just that... this is your dream, after all.”

“So?” Harry prodded, beginning to feel a little weary. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Oh. No reason,” Ron answered vaguely.

Harry huffed out a breath. “Ron, spit it out, will you?”

Ron let out a long, drawn out sigh. “Since, as we’ve already been over, this is your head and Hermione’s the ‘great love of you life’ or whatever the bleeding hell you two are labeling it as, don’t you think you’d have put her in here already?”

Harry shifted, feeling tendrils of worry. “I guess...”

“I’m just pointing that out, is all,” Ron said, continuing on. “I’m sure everything is fine.”

“Maybe she’s in trouble,” Harry said, hurrying after him. Then a much more disturbing thought hit him. “Maybe she’s mad at me.”

“Maybe.”

Harry scowled. “No, that can’t be right. I haven’t done anything really stupid recently.”

“Maybe you don’t need her yet,” Ron said.

“No,” Harry protested. “I always need her.”

Ron made a slight gagging sound in the back of his throat that caused Harry to stop and glare at him. “You’re disgusting, you know that?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I need you, too,” he snapped. “You and Hermione both. When are you ever going to get that through your thick head?”

That was, of course, the moment that Ron stopped dead in his tracks. “Sorry, Harry,” he said. “I have to go.”

Harry blinked at him. “What d’you mean? I thought you were going to stay with me until the very end...”

Ron shook his head. "No... I have... I have to go. Sorry."

"But... Ron!" Harry said. "Why now?"

"Hagrid," Ron said. "He needs help with all that wood. I've left him alone too long."

"Oh," Harry answered, feeling an emptiness creep over him. "Well, I'd hate for Hagrid to be alone..."

Ron grunted. "Harry, one more thing... I'm supposed to tell you..."

Harry looked at him. "Yeah... what is it?"

"We're serving our detention next week."

Harry frowned. "Detention?"

"Well, yeah. We still owe a week's worth of detention. You didn't honestly believe that McGonagall would just forget about it, did you?"

"What detention?" Harry demanded.

Ron just stared at him. "You know, our... duel. You might be repressing, which I can certainly understand. We were yelling at each other, and the next thing we knew, I sent you flying across the room."

Harry absentmindedly rubbed the back of his head. "Oh... yeah..." he said weakly. "I'd forgotten about that."

Ron grinned, looking pleased with himself. "Don't worry, I haven't. That's, what, twice now that I've gotten the upper hand in a fight?"

Now Harry's hand absently strayed to his cheek, which felt oddly sore all of a sudden. "I let you..."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yeah, whatever, Harry. By the way, did I ever apologize for punching you?"

“No,” Harry answered immediately. “But I hardly think that you need to—”

“Okay,” Ron cut in. “Because I’m not planning on it.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Still working through those jealousy issues?”

Ron flashed him a grin. “You bet.”

“Don’t go,” Harry said suddenly. “I know Hagrid needs you, but so do I...”

Ron watched his face in sympathy before pointing ahead of him. Harry followed the direction of his finger, surprised to see the path end abruptly at the entrance to a large meadow. Harry could make out a lone figure sitting on a rock beside the tip of the path.

“I think you found her,” Ron said with a small, sad smile. “You don’t need me anymore, Harry. ”

Harry was about to protest, he did need Ron, but before he could make a sound Ron was gone. Harry stared stupidly at the spot that he’d been only moments ago, before continuing along the path, his eyes on the figure he was quickly approaching.

He studied her as he approached, feeling a rush of relief to know that he’d found her. It had been stupid of him to doubt it—of course he’d find her. Of course she wouldn’t let him go without saying good-bye. And it made sense, didn’t it, that she’d be the last one he would find?

He stopped in front of her, breathing hard. She was sitting sedately on a rock, her legs curled up under her. On her lap were several open books and a long, thin piece of parchment. She was chewing nervously on the tip of her quill as she stared pensively down at her books.

The sight was so familiar to Harry that he couldn’t help but smile at her. “Hermione,” he greeted quietly.

She glanced up at him, eyes searching him appraisingly as she did so. She removed the quill from her mouth and smiled. "Harry," she said. "You made it."

Harry glanced at the meadow stretching out before them. "I guess so..." he said doubtfully. Staring at the meadow filled him a deep feeling of unease.

Hermione turned her attention back to her books. "Lots to do..." she muttered. "Not very much time left to do it in."

"Hermione," he said slowly. "What... what are you doing?"

She rolled her eyes and didn't bother to look up at him. "Studying, of course. What does it look like I'm doing?"

Harry stared at her. "Why are you studying now? Don't you think... don't you think there might be more important things to do?"

She just shook her head. "Harry," she said, her voice resigned. "How many times do I have to tell you? I'm weeks ahead of what we're doing in class..."

"Then why are you studying?" Harry asked sharply. "Don't you think that now really isn't the best time?"

She looked up, shooting him an annoyed look as she did so. "I'm doing this for you!" she declared. "You know, Harry, N.E.W.T.'s are only a year away! You have to be prepared!"

"Only a year away..." Harry repeated. "Only a year away? Don't get me wrong, Hermione, N.E.W.T.'s are important and all, but I hardly think that I have to start studying this very instant..."

She glared at him. "You know," she said snippily. "You could be a little more grateful for all the help I've given you."

"I am grateful," Harry said. "You're the only reason that I'm going to be coming back to Hogwarts next year, you know that. I just don't understand why I have to start studying for N.E.W.T.'s now!"

"I'm just trying to make sure you'll be prepared!" she said shrilly. "I want you to know everything that you have to know! I need to know that I've done everything I can to help you!"

"I... okay..." Harry said, rather lamely, not sure what he was supposed to say to that.

Hermione sniffled and turned her attention back down to her books. "I'm making up a schedule for you..."

Harry couldn't help himself. "Another schedule? Hermione..." he dropped his voice. "Don't you think that perhaps you're overdoing it a little?"

She stood up suddenly, the books spilling off her lap and landing with a dull thud on the ground. She stared up at him, her chin hefted and her eyes wide and furious. "Fine," she said coolly. "If you don't want my help, then I'm not going to give it to you."

"I do want your help!" Harry yelled. "I just don't need help studying for my N.E.W.T.'s! My N.E.W.T.'s which are a year away!"

"Well, good!" she hissed angrily. "Because I don't want to help you, anyway!"

Harry stared at her, beginning to get angry himself. "Whatever," he snapped, backing away. "Forget it. I'll just..."

Harry turned, planning on going into the meadow, like he was supposed to. He stared. The darkness was beginning to creep down on it, making the meadow look dark and sinister. Harry's stomach gave a small lurch of fear. He whirled back around, surprised to see that Hermione's eyes were wide and shining.

"Harry," she whispered, shaking a little. "Don't go... you're not ready yet..."

"I..." Harry swallowed stiffly. "Hermione, I need your help."

"I've been trying to help you!" she burst out, her voice taking on a panicked tone. She gestured to the books lying in the mud at her feet. "What do you think all this was for?"

"Hermione..." Harry said, a little desperately. "You don't... I don't need help studying!"

Hermione stared helplessly down at her books. "How else am I supposed to help you, Harry?"

Harry stared at her, wondering how to make her understand. Finally, in a quiet voice he said, "There are more important things than books and cleverness."

She took a breath and took a startled step backwards. "Like what?" she asked softly.

"Like..." Harry whispered, moving closer to her. "Like friendship and bravery and..."

"And love," Hermione finished for him. She looked up, meeting his eyes. "Oh, Harry... and love..."

Harry reached her and stopped. He held out his arms and she sunk against him, letting out a pathetic snuffle as she did so.

"Don't go," she pleaded again. "You're not ready yet..."

She pressed her face to his neck, her arms tightening painfully around him. "... I have to..." he said. "But... Hermione, this isn't real. I'm just dreaming. I have to be dreaming. Stuff that happened... it wouldn't be possible, otherwise."

"What do you mean?" she asked, tilting her face up to meet his eyes.

"Well..." Harry said hesitantly. "I saw my parents. And Sirius."

"Oh," she whispered. "Oh, my. That must have been... do you want to talk about it?"

Harry just shook his head. "Not really. Not now, at least."

"Harry?"

Harry frowned down at her, disturbed by the way her voice was trembling. "What is it?"

"Well... it's just that... please don't die. I don't think I could stand it, if you did."

"I'm not going to..." Harry trailed off, incredulous. "This is just a dream, Hermione. I can't die in a dream."

She let out a long breath. "Oh, I suppose not. But I don't just mean..." she stopped, swallowing heavily. "You know what I mean."

Harry tilted her chin up so he could look her in the eyes. "No," he said, his voice sharp. "I don't know what you mean. I'm not going to die. We've been over this, Hermione. Remember? I'm the Boy Who Lived. I'm not going to die. You were the one who told me that."

"Yes... but..." her voice quivered, and she stared up at him. "Well, we don't really know that for sure..."

"No, we don't," Harry snapped, pulling away from her. "Thanks for the reminder. That's exactly what I needed to hear."

Her eyes grew large and she shook her head vigorously. "I didn't mean it like that..." she said, wringing her hands. "I just... where are you going?"

Harry nodded his head in the direction of the meadow. "I'm running out of time," he said bitterly. "I have to go face this thing."

"Oh," she said, sounding even more upset. "Harry... wait..." She reached his side and grabbed his arm. "I'll go with you."

Harry stopped and slowly turned around to face her. "No," he said flatly. "I have to do this alone."

She let out a little cry of frustration. "No, you don't! I'm coming with you!"

Harry shook his head. "It's just a dream, Hermione," he said, though he wasn't sure which of them he was trying to convince. "I think... I think this is something I have to do alone."

She took a step back, hands fluttering nervously near her face. "Okay..." she said, looking like it was far from being okay. "If you're sure about this..."

"I'm not sure," he said in a tight voice. "But I don't... I don't want to risk losing you."

Her eyes glistened. "Well, I don't want to lose you, either."

"You won't," Harry said, continuing on. He was about to step into the meadow when Hermione grabbed his arm again. He whirled around, more than a little bit on edge. "What?" he demanded. "What now?"

She blinked and took a step back, chewing her lip nervously. "I just..." her eyes filled with tears. "Be careful," she whispered.

Harry met her eyes. "Is that all?"

She shook her head. "No," she whispered again. "I... I love you."

Harry stared at her a moment before leaning forward and crushing his mouth to hers. Her arms curled around his neck, clinging to him as they kissed.

"That's the sixth time," Harry said softly, as he pulled away.

She looked a little dazed. "What... what are you talking about?"

"That you've said it," Harry answered, smiling. "That's the sixth time."

"You've been keeping count?" she questioned, eyes glinting a little in amusement. "How many times have you said it?"

“You know...” Harry said slowly. “I’m not really sure. More than you, anyway.”

“I love you,” she said again. “Now what am I at?”

“Seven,” Harry said. “I’m still winning, though.”

Hermione just shook her head. “Boys—it’s always a competition with you.” They shared a fond smile before Hermione continued. “You need to go, Harry. You’re running out of time.”

“I really wish people would stop saying that,” Harry grumbled, backing slowly away from her. “Hermione?”

She watched him with deep worry as he took one step onto the meadow. “Yes?”

“I love you, too,” he said, turning.

Harry held on to that thought as he crossed the path and entered the meadow.

Without the path to lead him, Harry felt disoriented. The darkness over the meadow was consuming, he could barely make out the slight sway of the tall grass. He kept moving forward, all sense of direction gone. Tall shrubs and weeds brushed by his face and tore at his clothes. The ground was crunchy under his feet.

More than ever, Harry felt alone. Ron was gone. He'd left Hermione behind. He was off facing... whatever it was he had to face... alone.

He was tired. As far as he was concerned, he'd been walking nearly the entire day. His stomach roared at him, the tea and biscuits long forgotten. The night air felt cool against his bare arms and he felt himself shivering slightly.

He wasn't sure how long he walked. The meadow continued on, twisting, the same, unabating. There appeared to be no end in sight.

Slowly the plants began to even out. When the last of the meadow faded, Harry found himself lost in a large field.

He continued along the field, the walk was easier, but no less frustrating. Again, he had no sense of direction, no idea if he was heading in the right way or the wrong way. The sky began to lighten, the rising of the sun a short time away. Eventually, faced with the infinite plains of the field, Harry grew restless.

He stopped, scowling largely. "Okay," he said loudly. "This is getting ridiculous."

There was no answer to his call, nor had Harry expected one. He sat down on the grass, his aching feet screaming for a rest.

"I'd really like to wake up now," he muttered, to no one in particular. "I'm sure people are worried about why I've been asleep for so long."

There was still no answer. Harry, in vague experimentation, pinched himself, hoping that might awaken him. He frowned when the pinch hurt, but he remained seated on the ground.

Rising, he decided his only option was to continue on. Pressing forward, he kept walking, his pace slow and plodding. His feet hurt. His stomach hurt. He felt faint and light-headed.

Just when Harry had almost given up, the brightening sky blackened before his very eyes. The sun, which had just begun to creep over the horizon, disappeared behind a storm of angry, black clouds.

Harry blinked, feeling like something was about to happen. He glanced around, noticing for the first time that he was no longer on the grassy field.

He was in a graveyard. A graveyard with only two tombstones.

Harry approached them cautiously, feeling his heart pounding in his chest. His hands shook as he neared them, his breath coming out in short gasps. He reached the tombstones and crouched down, squeezing his eyes shut as he did so.

'It's just a dream,' he told himself. 'Whatever happens, this is just a dream.'

Slowly Harry opened his eyes. Despite the quickly waning daylight, the names on the tombstones jumped out at him, clear as day.

Tom Morvolo Riddle

"I Am Lord Voldemort"

Harry James Potter

"The Boy Who Lived"

"Tragic, isn't it?"

Harry whirled around, searching frantically for his wand as he did so.

"Oh, there's no need for that, Harry. This is only a dream after all. I think our final confrontation will be somewhere well... more concrete, to say the least."

Harry backed up a step, banging into one of the graves as he did so. He glanced down. It was his own. The realization made him feel sick. His knees felt weak and he resisted the urge to let himself collapse.

Grabbing the edge of the stone to support himself, he stood up, glaring at Voldemort as he did so. Voldemort stared back at him, a smile playing across his lips. His long, black robes billowed down around him, making him blend in with the darkness and shadows. His pose was relaxed, almost conciliatory, and making Harry more nervous than anything else.

Harry realized that this part wasn't just his dream. No, Voldemort was really standing right in front of him, Voldemort was in his head, Voldemort would remember this conversation upon awakening...

'He wants something,' Harry thought, surprised at his own insight. 'He wants something from me.'

It gave Harry power. Feeling somewhat more confident, he stood up a little straighter, daring to let go of the stone as he did so.

"Tom," he greeted quietly. "How good of you to drop by my head."

Voldemort smiled. The smile twisted his face, only succeeding in making him look more sinister. "Your head?" he said mildly. "What makes you so sure we're not in my head?"

"Because—" Harry sputtered. "Because—the stuff that happened—"

"Could have been my attempts at playing with your head, no?" Voldemort said, amusement colouring his voice. "Quite fascinating, really... to see how you interact with those around you..."

As Voldemort's words began sinking in, Harry had to fight back a rapidly growing anger. How much of his "dream" had he really created? How much had Voldemort implanted in his mind? How much control did he have? He already knew he couldn't wake up. And though nearly everything that had happened wasn't real and couldn't possibly be real, it felt more real than Harry would have liked.

The ease in which Voldemort had managed to play with Harry's emotions was horrifying. Harry welcomed his anger, using it to push away his fear. "If you think that you can just use me for your sick games, then you have another thing coming!"

"Temper, Potter, temper," Voldemort said coolly. "Let me give you some advice, Harry, as one enemy to another. Emotions are weakness, never allow yourself to be swayed by them."

"Yeah," Harry muttered. "That's right. I'll be sure and do exactly what the evildest wizard of our time wants me to do."

"Controlling your emotions does not make you evil," Voldemort said, a slight smirk on his features. "Though, if it is evil you're after, I must say, you would make a fine dark wizard."

Harry knew that Voldemort was baiting him. Despite that, the accusation still managed to make his face flush. "I'd never become a dark wizard," Harry said, trying to keep his voice calm. "Never."

Voldemort approached him, bending down so he could read the gravestones. Harry stayed where he was, refusing to let Voldemort intimidate him. "Is that really what you think?" Voldemort asked, tapping his tombstone. "You and I are a lot alike, Potter. Even you must see that."

"We're nothing alike," Harry spat immediately.

Voldemort's smirk widened. "Harry, do us a favour, hmm? I'm connected to your mind in ways you have no comprehension of. Lying will get you no where."

Harry stared stonily back at him. "We're nothing alike," he repeated. "Someone once told me that it was my ability to love that separated us. You can never love, you can never understand it. And that makes us very, very different."

Voldemort's eyes darkened. "I see," he said. "You may have a point there. But don't you think, Harry, after all this time, that love is only a

weakness? The most important people in your life died because they loved you. And those that you love, now, are at risk. Don't think that I won't attempt to use them in order to destroy you."

Hearing his worst fear spoken aloud was almost more than Harry could take. He looked away from Voldemort's fiery eyes, choosing instead to focus on the ground. "I'll kill you before I let you take any more of the people I love."

"Brave words," Voldemort said, rising. Harry could feel his form towering over him, but he refused to look and allow Voldemort the satisfaction of seeing his fear. "Though mostly empty. I have more power than you can ever attempt to achieve."

There. There it was. Harry felt a small pang of victory at Voldemort's words. Fear. Voldemort feared him. Harry knew, in that moment, that Voldemort was lying. Voldemort was afraid of him, he was afraid of whatever power Harry had that could destroy him.

Harry let a little smile play across his mouth. "Oh, really?" he said. "Is that what you really believe?"

Voldemort stiffened. "You think you're important do you, Harry? Let me tell you something, boy. You're nothing to me. Nothing but an annoyance that I'll one day destroy."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Oh, sure. I'm nothing. Oops! Didn't realize that when I defeated you as a baby. And, you know, I meant to die all those times you tried to kill me—it just slipped my mind. Sorry about that."

Voldemort's eyes flashed and he made a move towards Harry before holding himself back. "You're lucky this is only a dream," he snarled. "Or you'd have long ago joined your dead parents."

Harry felt a familiar flash of anger at the thought of his parents. Holding himself aloof, his eyes darkened as he kept his unwavering gaze on the wizard before him. "Temper, Tom, temper. Emotions are a weakness."

Voldemort's eyes flashed again before his face went impassive. He studied Harry coolly. "What about your girlfriend, Potter?" he asked softly, a predatory glint in his eyes. "One of your deepest fears, jeopardizing her safety because you chose to fall in love with her. Tell me, Harry, do you think she's awarded the same protection as you during summer hours? Can you really protect her every waking moment of every day? Are you really naïve enough to believe that your "love" can protect her? Because, I assure you, I'm planning on killing her. Painfully."

Harry felt all of the colour drain from his face. Every part of him instinctively flinched at the way Voldemort was casually threatening Hermione's life. But despite the loud beating of his heart, Harry managed to keep his face calm. He knew what Voldemort was doing and he was determined not to let it work. He refused to give Voldemort any more control over his emotions.

"You clearly have a death wish," Harry said, between clenched teeth. "Keep threatening Hermione and we'll see which one of us ends up in the ground."

Something in Harry's words made Voldemort's eyes jump in interest. "Interesting choice of words, Potter."

"Is that so, Riddle?"

Voldemort's eyes flared in indignation. "That name holds no meaning for me."

"Yeah," Harry said, grinning. "But it pisses you off, so that's enough for me."

Voldemort let out a sharp cackle of laughter. "It really is a pity, Potter, that you are so dead-set against becoming a dark wizard. You would have been a powerful ally."

"As it is," Harry said, meeting his gaze. "That's never going to happen. I'm not your ally. Far from it, actually."

"Ahh, there it is," Voldemort said, steepling his long, bony fingers together. "After all this time, it is you who might stop my rise to power. It is you who has the power to destroy me. It is not Dumbledore, nor anyone at your idiot Ministry. It is only you."

'The prophecy,' Harry thought. 'He wants to know what was in the prophecy.'

Suddenly clear on where Voldemort was heading, Harry backed up a few steps, trying harder than ever not to let his facial expression show his internal panic.

Voldemort studied the two graves with avid concentration. "So who will it be?" he said softly. "One or the other, is that the fate that awaits us, Potter?"

Harry could only hold his silence, lest he say anything else that would give too much of the prophecy away.

"Interesting," Voldemort said, continuing to stare at the gravestones. "And it was I who gave you such power when you received that accursed scar so many years ago." Voldemort's upper lip curled in disgust. "You can't possibly hope to defeat me."

Harry stared at him, eyes unblinking. He felt confidence surge through him. "Actually," Harry said quietly. "I think I have pretty good odds here. I'm beginning to think that Dumbledore isn't the only wizard you fear."

Voldemort laughed. "There is no one that I fear. I am the greatest wizard of all time. I have defied death time and time again. It would be impossible to defeat me completely."

"Not impossible," Harry said, holding his challenging gaze. "Difficult, I'm sure. But not impossible."

"A warning, Potter," Voldemort said, eyes settling on their gravestones again. "You are not as well protected as you might think. I will kill you at the first opportunity that I have."

“And I’ll be sure to return the favor,” Harry said evenly.

“I’d love for you to try,” Voldemort said.

“Merlin, you have an ego,” Harry muttered. “Okay, this is just getting ridiculous. If there was ever a time for me to wake up...”

“Harry!”

Harry stared at Voldemort. “What?” he demanded. “Any more hollow threats? Anyone else close to me that you’d like to threaten? Hmm, let’s see, you haven’t brought up Ron yet...”

“HARRY!”

“Well, he is my best friend,” Harry said, a tad defensive. “You don’t have to get all in a strop about it...”

“HARRY!”

“Well, fine, then! You haven’t gone after Hagrid yet, he’s pretty close to me...”

“Harry? What are you talking about?”

With great effort, Harry sat up, slamming his head into someone as he did so. “Bloody hell!” he hollered, feeling at the end of his rope. Holding his nose, Harry squinted his eyes, some kind of sense worming its way into his mind. That’s when he noticed that he was lying in bed, in a hospital bed, and that Neville Longbottom was staring at him with very wide eyes, squeaking and rubbing his forehead.

What the hell was going on? Harry looked around frantically, groping blindly for his glasses. “What’s going on?” he demanded, trying to get his bearings. “Where’s Voldemort? Where’s the graveyard? Where am I?”

Neville whimpered and clamped a hand over his mouth. "Harry..." he said, sounding faint. "You... um, are you feeling okay? Should I get Madam Pomfrey?"

Harry's head was spinning. "I'm awake," he said, feeling a little bit jubilant. "I'm awake. No more stupid paths that don't end, no more dark meadows and graveyards and, best of all, no Voldemort."

Neville whimpered again. "S-sorry I woke you, Harry," he squeaked. "It's... you were thrashing around and... well, I didn't know... I wasn't sure if..."

Harry waved a hand, knocking the bedside table as he did so. Aha! His glasses. Feeling triumphant, he placed them on the bridge of his nose, grateful that he could see Neville properly. "It's okay," he said. "In fact... it's great. I wasn't sure I was ever going to be able to wake up."

That reminded Harry that he'd been dreaming for nearly two days straight. He glanced around the hospital wing, surprised to see that he and Neville appeared to be alone. Well, he didn't expect people to stay vigilant by his bedside or anything, but some kind of concern would have been nice. Suddenly worried, he frowned in Neville's direction.

"Where is everyone?" he asked.

Neville looked at him strangely. "Harry," he said slowly. "Are you sure you're feeling okay? Maybe I should get Madam Pomfrey..."

"I'm fine!" Harry said, a warning note to his voice. "Just... where is everyone?"

Neville shifted, looking uncomfortable. "Well, uh, most people are eating dinner. I was sort of hoping that I'd be able to get you alone for a bit."

Harry stared at him. "What?"

“I mean... I just... I needed someone to talk to.” Neville stared down at his hands. “I didn’t really know who else to go to.”

“Oh,” Harry said, feeling nervous and more than a little confused. “Well, I... Hermione’s a really good listener, you know. And, actually, Ron isn’t too bad—”

Neville shook his head, his cheeks going red. “No!” he said loudly. “It’s, well, it’s...” his voice dropped an octave. “Girl stuff.”

Harry stared at him. Oh, no. No. No way. He hated these conversations. Hated them. He shook his head, willing the panic to leave his mind. “Neville,” he said seriously. “How long have I been asleep?”

Neville jerked a shoulder. “I don’t know, Harry. Not long. A few hours maybe. Why?”

“A few hours?” Harry cried, incredulous. “No! That’s not right! It’s been... it’s been days!”

Neville stood up, looking embarrassed. “Harry... are you sure you’re okay? Maybe this wasn’t the best time to bring this up...”

Harry avoided Neville’s eyes, feeling guilty. He gave a long, pained sigh. “Has it really only been hours?”

Neville nodded, looking sheepish.

“Oh, well... that’s good,” Harry said slowly. “I’m glad that no one was worried about me, I guess.”

Neville just continued to stare at him. “Are you sure you don’t want me to get someone? I could get Hermione if you want, I think she’s in the library.”

“No,” Harry said quickly. “It’s fine. It’s... it’s nothing. What did you want to talk to me about?”

Neville fidgeted nervously. "If you're uncomfortable, I understand. I just... I really just needed someone to talk to and.... And, well, you have a ton of experience with girls and stuff so I thought that... why are you laughing?"

"Me?" Harry said. "Experience with girls? Seriously, have you tried Ron? He's not bad, all things considered."

If possible, Neville blushed even harder. "I, uh... I can't talk to Ron," he swallowed. "I don't think... I don't think it would be appropriate."

Harry continued to stare at him. "Neville, is this about Hermione again? Because—"

"No!" Neville cut in empathetically. "No, no," he gestured wildly. "I don't like Hermione anymore. Besides she's, well, yours, so I never even considered..."

"Mine?" Harry repeated, feeling tingly all of a sudden. "Is that what people think?"

"Well, actually," Neville said, a small frown on his features. "I think you're more generally thought of as hers, but the feeling's still there, isn't it?"

"Hers?" Harry echoed, grinning. "I'm hers?"

Neville just shrugged. "Hermione's scary when she's angry," he said, by way of explanation. "I think most people would think twice before making a move on you."

Harry, feeling oddly cheered by that piece of news, was suddenly inclined to be a little more generous to Neville. "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

Neville sucked in a breath and mumbled, "I migh' avekissed inneysley"

Harry stared. "What?"

Neville stood up. "I KISSED GINNY WEASLEY!" he yelled out. The omission made his eyes widen in fear and he sat back down, looking mortified. "Oh, no," he moaned. "Someone must have heard that..."

Harry just stared, feeling an increasing panic. Well, that at least explained why Neville couldn't talk to Ron...

"You kissed Ginny Weasley?" Harry repeated loudly.

Neville turned a fiery shade of red and looked wildly around the hospital wing. "Yes—no! Yes! No! Yes! Damn it! Someone's going to hear!"

"Okay," Harry said, attempting to sound soothing. "It's okay. Just don't panic."

"I'M NOT PANICKING!" Neville shouted before burying his head in his hands. "Harry," he moaned, "what am I going to do?"

"Err..." Harry replied, rather unhelpfully.

Neville looked up at him eagerly. "Yeah? What do you think?"

"Err..." Harry said again, thinking about how wildly unfair this whole thing was. He'd just awoken from what one could construe as a terrible nightmare. It didn't seem right that now he was expected to help Neville with girl problems. Ginny Weasley problems, no less. "Well, um... do you like her?"

Neville turned an even deeper shade of red. He merely nodded.

"Okay," Harry said, taking pity on him. "And... err... does she like you?"

Neville just shrugged, looking disturbingly close to tears.

"Well!" Harry said brightly. "That sounds encouraging! I think you should go for it! How did she react when you kissed her?"

Neville studied the floor with concentration. "She kind of... ran away."

"She ran away?" Harry repeated in horror. He felt stirrings of sympathy for Neville. "Before she ran away did she, err... you know, kiss you back?"

Neville pawed at the floor with his foot. "Yes, she did. She... really did." Neville looked even more embarrassed. "There might have been tongue."

"She slipped you tongue???" Harry repeated again, feeling increasingly more impressed by Neville's exploits.

Neville glanced around the hospital wing desperately. "Harry..." he said faintly. "Do you think that maybe you could keep your voice down?"

"Yeah, sorry... just surprised, that's all."

Neville looked dejected. "Well, I know I'm not the most popular guy in the school," he said, a melancholy note to his voice. "I guess it was stupid to think that someone like Ginny might like me."

"No!" he said quickly. "Neville, it's just... she slipped you tongue!" Harry grinned. "From what I know of it, that's a pretty drastic move for a first kiss. That's probably why she ran away, she was too embarrassed to face you."

Neville finally glanced up from the floor, hope shining in his eyes. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah. It sounds like she fancies you."

"Really?" Neville said again, back to looking like an eager puppy.

"Definitely," Harry said. "You should find her, you know, reassure her. Girls like that."

"Really?"

Harry sighed. "Yes."

Neville looked a little bit cheered at that. "Harry?" he asked, looking embarrassed. "When you and Hermione you know..." he dropped his voice. "Kissed for the first time, did she slip you... tongue?"

Harry stared at him for a moment, wondering whether or not Neville was joking. Realizing that he wasn't, Harry felt his face heat up a little in embarrassment.

"Uh, no..." Harry said slowly. "Hermione probably would have cursed me if I tried anything like that. As it was, I'm pretty sure she hit me afterwards. Course," Harry continued, smirking slightly. "We don't have much trouble snogging now..."

"Did she really hit you?" Neville asked, eyes wide.

Harry winced. Why, why had he ever brought that up? "Err... yeah, I guess so." Harry shifted uncomfortably. "I mean, not hard or anything. She was just surprised is all. I think," he added uncertainly, beginning to wonder why Hermione had hit him all those months ago.

Neville leaned forward in interest. "Really?" he breathed. "Things for you two always seemed so... easy..."

"No, not so much," Harry said, face heating up again. "Look, Neville, it's not really something that I want to talk about."

Neville's eyes registered hurt. "Oh," he said in a melancholy voice. "Sorry, I didn't mean to pry. I just don't really know what I'm doing. I don't want to mess things up."

At the dejected look on Neville's face, Harry felt some of his resolve crumble. "Fine," Harry muttered. "Just... don't tell anyone about this, okay? Especially Ron."

Neville paled. "Oh, no..." he moaned. "Ron! Ron is going to murder me."

"Neville, I don't think that Ron—"

“Yes, he will!” Neville interrupted, voice going up an octave. “He nearly killed you when you and Hermione first started going out! And I just kissed his sister!”

“WHAT?” Harry burst out angrily. “He did not nearly kill me! Who told you that?”

Neville had the sense to look embarrassed. “Well, when Ron told us about it afterwards...”

“Ron told you about it afterwards?” Harry said, furious. “He spread that around??? It was—he did not nearly kill me!”

“Of—of course, Harry.”

“He got LUCKY!” Harry yelled, still angry. “Lucky, d’you hear me? He got lucky.”

“O—okay, Harry.”

“Just because he got the word ‘expelliarmus’ out before I could get the word ‘stupefy’ out does NOT MEAN HE NEARLY KILLED ME!”

Neville actually stumbled backwards a step. “Oh, no,” he moaned. “I’d never be able to take Ron on in a duel. I’m going to die...”

Harry forced himself to take a deep breath. “You’re not going to die,” he said irritably.

Neville’s eyes widened. “Ginny used to go out with Dean! Dean’s going to hold me down while Ron kills me!”

“What?” Harry said. “I doubt that—”

Neville pointed a shaking finger in his direction. “You! Ginny used to like you!” Neville was visibly sweating now. “You’re in on it, too, aren’t you? You want me dead!”

“I—huh? What? What are you going on...” Neville was as white as a sheet and looked near passing out. “NEVILLE! Just... Oh... to hell with it... Petrificus Totales!”

Neville’s entire body froze up and all he could do was stare at Harry with wide, accusatory eyes.

“Sorry, Neville,” Harry said. “I just... listen, okay? No one is going to kill you, I promise. Yeah, Ron’s a little... sensitive, but he’ll deal with it. Just... get Ginny to tell him or something. As for Dean, he and Lavender seem pretty close lately, so I wouldn’t worry too much about it. And Ginny’s crush on me was very much unreciprocated. Look, I’m going to unfreeze you and you’re going to find Ginny and talk to her. Ask her about how she’s feeling, girls love that. Be as supportive as you possibly can and let her make the next move. If she’s crying, which she very well might be, just... try not to step on her feet or anything, okay? And Ron did NOT nearly kill me. Finite Incantantum.”

Neville immediately fell over, banging into the floor with a sickening crunch. “Ow!” he yelped pathetically.

Harry winced. “Sorry.”

Neville picked himself up from the floor and shook his head. “No, it’s...” he face broke out into a radiant grin. “Thanks, Harry!”

With a silly smile on his face, Neville walked with his head high out of the hospital wing.

Finally alone, Harry allowed himself the simple pleasure of leaning back. For the first time in weeks he didn’t feel tired. This cheered him and he decided that his next move would be to ask Madam Pomfrey for permission to leave. He glanced idly around the hospital wing, his thoughts returning to his befuddling dream.

He considered—and immediately scrapped—sharing the dream with Hermione and Ron. It would only worry Hermione and she already worried enough about him as it was. And, as much as Harry valued Ron’s friendship, the red-head would be less than helpful at

discerning the meanings hidden in his strange dream. Harry resolved to at least mention meeting Voldemort to Dumbledore, if nothing else.

After much hemming, hawing, and general arguing, Madam Pomfrey finally agreed to release Harry the next morning.

Feeling decidedly cheerful, Harry rose eagerly and practically took off running towards the Great Hall in order to meet Ron and Hermione at breakfast.

The meal was already in full swing when he arrived and the entire school was witness to his entrance. Harry was uncomfortably aware of the silence that descended upon the Great Hall with his arrival, and he bowed his head, hurrying over to the Gryffindor table.

He found Ron and Hermione right away. They were both staring at him with slightly surprised expressions. He sat down next to Hermione, feeling somewhat self-conscious by the obvious attention he was getting.

"Hey," he said weakly.

Hermione recovered from her shock first. "What are you doing?" she asked sharply. "You're supposed to be resting!"

Ron started snickering. "Getting tired of snoozing all day, mate?"

Harry jerked a shoulder. "I'm fine, Hermione. Madam Pomfrey said I could get back to classes and stuff."

"Oh," she said, blinking. "Well, that's good..."

Their eyes met and Harry wished that he could reach out to her, but the thought of so many eyes staring at them held him frozen in place. Hermione gave him a timid smile, and Harry could tell that she was struggling against the same impulse. Ron, paying no heed to anyone, eagerly dug into his breakfast.

"I'm starved," he declared, shoving forkfuls of food into his mouth as Hermione looked on in vague disgust.

Eventually, conversation started to pick up again as the other students returned to their own affairs. Harry couldn't quite contain his sigh of relief. "People are going to be staring at me all day, aren't they?"

"Hate to break it to you, Harry," Ron said with a grin. "But people pretty much stare at you all the time."

"Right," Harry said, a little distracted. He glanced around the Great Hall, sinking down in his seat when he found hundreds of eyes peering at him eagerly. "Err... no one thinks I'm, you know, nutters anymore, right?"

"Nope," Ron said cheerfully. "You've been elevated back to hero status. Mostly, anyway."

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look. "What?" Harry asked suspiciously.

Ron sighed. "Well... it's just that..."

"Yes?"

"There seems to be..."

"Yes?"

"Some kind of a sense that..."

"Hey, Harry!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all looked up, surprised to see Neville grinning at the three of them. Harry shrank down further into his seat.

"It's great to see you out of the hospital," Neville said, sounding entirely too happy. He leaned closer to Harry and winked. "By the way, the advice you gave me... worked great."

Neville looked at Hermione now, who was staring with her mouth slightly agape. Neville gave her a thumbs up sign and bent closer to her. "Great job picking Harry... I'm sure he makes an excellent boyfriend..."

Ron flushed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Neville wavered a little under Ron's gaze. "Ron," he squeaked nervously, backing up a step. "How are you?"

"Fine," Ron said, narrowing his eyes. "What's gotten into you today?"

"Nothing, nothing," Neville said, shooting Harry a panicked look.

"He's, uh... really happy about... something..." Harry said, rather unhelpfully.

"We can see that..." Ron muttered.

"Ron," Neville said, sounding nervous. "Have you talked to Ginny yet today?"

"No. Why?"

Neville started backing away. "No reason. See you guys later. Glad you're feeling better, Harry."

After he was gone, Ron stared after him, looking bewildered. Suddenly, his mouth turned into a smirk. "So..." he began conversationally. "How long has Neville had a crush on you for, Harry?"

Harry stared at him. "I'm sorry?"

Hermione tutted. "Honestly, Ron. I'm sure Neville was just... he was... I'm sure he was... Harry, what was he going on about?"

Harry tried to look innocent. "No idea. What's for breakfast?"

“Ha!” Ron yelled triumphantly. “He does have a crush on you! You just don’t want to admit it!”

Harry concentrated on piling his plate with food. “Ron,” he hissed. “I’m not sure everyone at the Slytherin table heard you. Try it again with more volume.”

“Sarcasm accomplishes nothing,” Hermione said briskly. “Now, we know you’re hiding something, so just tell us.”

“Yeah!” Ron burst in. “Or Hermione’s not going to kiss you for a week!”

“Hey!” Harry and Hermione yelled in unison.

Ron looked pleased with himself. “So? What is it that you’re hiding from us?”

Harry sighed and steadfastly tried to ignore the pleading looks Ron and Hermione were shooting him. “Well...” he mumbled. “I sort of... gave Neville girl advice.” Having said all that in a rush, Harry stared down at his plate. “Mmm... pancakes... looks great...”

“You did what?” Ron yelped.

“Oh, Harry, you didn’t!” Hermione said faintly.

Harry’s head snapped up. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Hermione flushed. “N-nothing... it’s just that...”

“You’re kind of an idiot when it comes to girls,” Ron filled in helpfully.

“What?” Harry said, horrified. “I am not!”

Hermione pointed to her plate, flushing an even deeper shade of red. “You’re right, Harry,” she said. “Those pancakes do look awfully good.”

"I... hey! Wait a minute! You think that I don't know anything about girls?"

"Yep," Ron said cheerfully. "You don't. Completely useless."

"Ron..." Hermione hissed warningly.

"I'll have you know!" Harry said angrily. "That the advice I gave Neville worked out great. Did you see how happy he was?"

Hermione looked worried. "Oh, dear. Maybe I should talk to him..."

Harry stared at her. "Hermione! What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing," she responded vaguely, finding her plate intensely interesting. "Eat your breakfast, Harry."

Ron grinned, looking smug. "Should have had him come to me, Harry."

Harry began to feel a little uncomfortable. "Well, I just thought... having some experience in the matter... I could, you know, help him out."

"Right," Ron said, sounding dubious. "So? Who is it, anyway? This girl that Neville likes so much? We should probably warn her that Neville's getting all his advice from you."

Harry frowned, willing his mind to come up with some excuse. "Err... I don't think it's my place to say."

Ron snorted. "Sure it is. We're your best friends. You have to tell us."

Harry swallowed with difficulty, trying very hard not to stare directly at the red head. "You really think so?"

"C'mon, Harry." A sudden thought seemed to strike him. "He doesn't still fancy Hermione, does he?"

Hermione looked up. "Neville... fancied... me?"

Harry began to feel even more uncomfortable. "I never mentioned that?"

"No."

"Interesting."

Ron coughed. "Yeah, very touching. He doesn't, does he?"

"Err..." Harry fumbled, vying for time. "It's... uh, he'll tell you when the time is appropriate."

"Neville fancied me?" Hermione squeaked again, looking completely bewildered.

"Yes," Harry said. "He did. Honestly, it shouldn't be that hard to believe. I mean... he has good taste, at least..."

Hermione melted. "Oh... Harry..."

"HA!" Harry said triumphantly, sending a look in Ron's direction. "See! I'm great with girls."

"He's trying to change the subject," Ron said to Hermione. "Did you notice that?"

"Ron, honestly... it's Neville's business. I admire Harry for keeping it a secret."

"Sure, sure!" Ron said with a wave of his hand. "And you're not just saying that because you're waiting to ask Harry about it later."

"Ron, really, what kind of a person do you think I am?"

"I think you're a person who knows far too much about how to get Harry Potter to tell you things he won't tell anyone else."

"That's not true. Harry tells us both everything. Right, Harry?"

Thankfully, Harry was spared having to make an answer by the arrival of the Owl Post. He was surprised when a large number of letters were dropped in front of him by owls he didn't recognize. He stared at the letters in slight suspicion, wondering what he was going to find if he were to open them.

"Ron," he said slowly. "Why am I getting so much mail?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Why do you think, Harry? Remember that article you did for the Prophet? Mail's been non-stop for you since then. We just got rid of most of it since you were too busy getting shut-eye in the hospital."

"Oh..." Harry said faintly. "And... it's all... good, right?"

Ron shifted. "That's what I was trying to say before. It's, well... some people still think that you've..."

"Joined the dark side and am now working with Voldemort?"

"Uh... yeah. That's about right, actually." Ron looked embarrassed. "It's only a few people, though."

Harry sighed and slowly pushed all his letters into a pile. "I'll throw them out, I guess."

Harry glanced in Hermione's direction, startled to find her near tears. She was clutching a letter in front of her, seemingly oblivious to all else as her eyes scanned it in mild horror. Worried, Harry reached out to her, surprised when she pulled away, scrunching the letter up in her hands.

"Oh, my," she said. "It's getting late. I have to get to class."

Harry shared a look with Ron before turning back to her, feeling concerned. "Hermione," he said quietly. "What's wrong?"

She started, as if just noticing him there for the first time. "I..." she shook her head, pushing the letter into her robes. "Nothing. Nothing's wrong."

“What was in the letter?”

“Nothing,” she said again firmly. “I’ll see you later.”

Harry reached out and grasped her wrist. “Hermione,” he said quietly. “I’m not stupid. Tell me what’s going on.”

She chewed her lip, a small internal battle raging war on her features. Finally, she shook her head. “Nothing,” she said again. “I’m running late. I’ll see you later.”

Feeling hurt, he let go of her, sinking back into his seat. “Fine,” he muttered. “See you.”

She sighed, looking hesitant. “It’s really nothing,” she repeated. Then, somewhat guilty, Hermione broke eye contact and hurried away. Harry turned back to Ron, who was staring at Hermione’s back with a befuddled look on his face.

“What was that?” Ron asked loudly.

“Dunno,” Harry answered honestly.

Ron jerked a shoulder. “Well—she did say it was nothing. Several times over in fact.”

“Yeah,” Harry replied, sounding unconvinced.

“Are you... worried?”

Harry blinked at him a few times. “Yeah,” he said again, eyes involuntarily shifting to the spot Hermione had been only moments before.

Harry was pleasantly surprised to find that he was perfectly caught up in his classes. In fact, he felt so comfortable in class that he was beginning to earn himself rather strange looks from the rest of the student body. In Transfiguration, McGonagall's eyebrows nearly disappeared into her hairline when she asked a question and Harry's hand shot up in the air right along with Hermione's. In Potions, Snape tried, and failed, to find something in his potion to criticize.

"You're like a male version of Hermione," Ron muttered at one point, looking half-disgusted and half-betrayed. "It's like I don't even know you anymore."

Hermione remained silent most of the day. He caught her looking at him a few times, an odd look in her eyes. He watched her curiously, taking note of the fact that she appeared flustered and distracted every time someone spoke to her. He caught her taking out the letter and reading it when she thought he wasn't looking.

Finally, annoyed with his scrutiny, she'd folded up the letter a final time. "It's fine," she said crossly, catching his eyes on her. "Quit worrying, you're giving me a headache."

Though Harry was exhausted by the end of the day, he insisted on studying with her in the common room after classes. His goal was to try and force her to tell him what she'd received in the letter.

They curled themselves up by the fire, books spread out around them. Harry watched her carefully as he did his homework, somewhat concerned when she stared blankly at a page of her book for nearly a half hour.

"Ron out with Luna again?" he asked casually.

She blinked, raising her head from her book to stare at him. "Yeah... I think so."

"What are you reading?"

She blinked again and stared in confusion at her book, somewhat surprised to see it there. "Oh, it's about apparating. Our tests are coming up soon."

"Right. Anything useful in it that I should know?"

"I... suppose..."

"Who sent you that letter?"

"My parents." As soon as she spoke the words, Hermione clamped a hand over her mouth, looking horrified.

"What happened?"

She shook her head. "Nothing," she whispered. "I told you to stop asking me about it."

Harry sighed. "Why won't you just tell me what it said?"

Hermione stared at him. "I can't."

"It's about me, isn't it?"

"You know," she hissed. "Not everything is about you. I know it might seem that way sometimes, but you'd be surprised to learn that there are actual, other people living in the world!"

Harry blinked and swallowed heavily. "You didn't mean that," he said quietly.

She sagged. "No... I didn't. Of course I didn't. I'm..." she sighed. "I'm sorry. Just believe me when I say it would be better if you didn't see the letter."

Harry set his work aside, feeling resigned. Knowing she'd probably kill him for what he was about to do, he stood, pulling out his wand as he did so. "Accio letter!" he called.

The letter flew out of her robes and straight into his hand. Hermione's mouth opened in surprise. Using her momentary distraction, Harry tore the letter open, planning on reading as much as he could before she regained her bearings. He glanced down at Hermione, somewhat startled to see that she'd pulled her knees up to her chest and was watching him with a defeated expression.

"Go on," she snapped. "If you're going to go to so much trouble to get your hands on the thing, you might as well read it."

Harry studied her for a moment before turning his eyes to the letter in his hand. Letting out a shaking breath, he opened it.

Dear Hermione,

After we received your last letter, we found ourselves facing a difficult situation. We felt joy for you, yes, but a terrible fear, as well. Though we are happy to hear that Harry seems to care as much about you as you do him, we were also, in all honesty, saddened by the news of your relationship with him. We know that being a witch has brought you fulfillment and joy, but we cannot help but be worried about you. Sweetheart, you are our only daughter.

Year after year we hear about these "adventures" you embark on with this boy. We understand that you are a loyal and caring friend, Hermione, but we are not blind to the danger. We are sure there have been many details left out of your stories.

Our worry only increased last year when the Headmaster wrote to say you were in the hospital wing recovering from a deadly curse. We were smart enough to understand that this injury was due to another one of your "adventures" with that Potter boy.

We're not stupid, Hermione. We know that you've had strong feelings for this boy for a long time. Honestly, we always hoped that he never returned them or that, if he did, he'd be smart enough to push you away. We may not be wizards, Hermione, but we understand a little about your world and we know that Harry is right in the thick of this war your world is facing.

Knowing what we do now, we wish that we had never allowed you to go to Hogwarts. Unfortunately, that is no longer our decision to make. If it were up to us, you'd be at home, safe and in a normal school. We love you, Hermione, and there is nothing more important to us than your safety.

We wish we could embrace your newfound relationship with joy, but our primary concern is with your safety. We can't force you to end things with Harry, but we beg you to be cautious. We are living in fear, Hermione. We are living with the fear that your name will be next on the list of the "missing." Our hearts ache with fear every day.

Please, Hermione, do what is right for your future. End things with Harry now, before you become more involved. If you can't bring yourself to do it for yourself, do it for us.

All our love,

Your mother and father

Harry lowered the letter slowly, feeling somewhat stunned. He wasn't sure how long he stared off into space for, but he jumped slightly at the sound of Hermione's voice.

"Harry..."

Harry blinked several times, his brain still sluggishly trying to process what he'd just read. "You lied," he managed.

Hermione stared at him, looking as though he was speaking a foreign language. "Excuse me?"

"You lied about the letter," he mumbled. "You said it wasn't about me."

Hermione smiled thinly and tentatively stood, taking a few hesitant steps towards him. "Can you blame me? Harry, you were just released from the hospital wing. You're exhausted. I was just trying to... I suppose I was... I was afraid that... I didn't want you doing anything stupid."

Harry stubbornly shook his head. "You should have told me."

"Oh, right," Hermione said bitterly. "Because I knew you'd take it in stride and react maturely. That's the kind of person you are, Harry. Always willing to talk things out before making rash decisions."

Harry clenched his jaw. "Thanks, Hermione," he ground out, beginning to feel slight prickles of anger. "I'm just a reckless prat who acts without thinking now, am I?"

"Give me the letter back," Hermione hissed, making a move towards him. "You had no right to take it from me."

"Fine!" Harry snapped, holding it out. "Not that you would have mentioned it, anyway!"

Hermione snatched the letter out of his hand and shoved it back into her robes. "You know, this is just like you. You jump to conclusions without bothering to get the entire story."

His earlier numb shock at reading the letter quickly faded as anger took its place. "Yeah?" he hissed. "Is that what you think? I just jump to conclusions and put your life into danger. Is that it?"

Hermione's face flushed. "I meant, talking to me! Asking me about how I feel! It's called being in a relationship, Harry! It's called trusting me!"

"YEAH?" Harry yelled. "A relationship? Like lying to me? Like keeping things from me? Like getting letters from your parents and not telling me?"

"This is why I didn't tell you!" Hermione shrieked, so frustrated that her cheeks were beginning to become tinged with red. "Because I knew you wouldn't be able to handle it!"

Having heard more than enough, Harry scowled and turned away, planning on going up to his dormitory until she calmed down. "Fine,"

he muttered, heading for the stairs. "When you're ready to talk to me about—"

"Oh, NO YOU DON'T!" Hermione yelled, stopping him in his tracks. Harry turned around, surprised to see that she was taking in heaving breaths of air. "If anyone is stomping away, Harry, it's me."

Then, without another word, Hermione slammed several of her books shut, gathered some of them in her arms, and ran up to the girls' dormitory, leaving Harry staring open-mouthed at her back.

Anger leaving as quickly as it came, Harry slowly walked over to the fireplace, feeling the numb shock settle down upon him again. Stupid, he realized. Stupid to fight with Hermione over something so personal. He felt another slight flash of indignation at her unwillingness to show him the letter in the first place, but he quickly pushed it away. She was right—he hadn't handled it well.

If Harry were to be completely honest with himself, he knew it was because Hermione's parents had touched upon his own worst fears. In some small part of himself he also felt a sense of vindication. Finally, he had justification for his attempt to push Hermione out of his life.

Voldemort, it all came down to Voldemort. All because he had marked Harry as his equal. For the first time, Harry wished that he could just get it over with—win or lose; he didn't care, just so long as it was over. Voldemort had taken everything: his parents, his childhood and his godfather.

'Not Hermione,' an insistent part of his head said. How could he let Voldemort end that, too? How could he give in and let him win?

'I hate him,' Harry decided, surprised by the calm in he felt in that thought. He was surprised by the simplicity he felt in hating Voldemort. It wasn't like the dislike he felt for Snape and Malfoy—riddled by blurred lines and shades of gray. No, hating Voldemort was altogether simple.

"Alright, I should've told you about the letter."

Harry jumped, completely taken off guard by Hermione's sudden reappearance. Slowly he turned around, feeling intensely relieved that she'd come back down to reconcile with him.

"Hey..." he said quietly. "You came back."

Hermione smiled shyly. She took two hesitant steps towards him and firmly took hold of his arm. Steering him over to the couch, she said, "Sit. You look like you're going to pass out."

Harry sat. "I'm fine," he mumbled.

Hermione gave him a pointed look. Sighing, she looked down at the floor, chewing her bottom lip nervously. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the letter," she finally said. "In all honesty, I was scared that you'd take it the wrong way."

Harry let out a short bark of laughter. "They're your parents," he snapped. "How are you taking it?"

She flinched. "Don't."

"Don't what? Don't—"

"Don't yell at me!" she said. "Of course reading this letter upsets me! But I need you to talk to me about it! Don't go into your Moody Self-Righteous Shtick!"

Harry blinked. "Excuse me? My Moody Self-Righteous Shtick?"

Looking a little relieved, Hermione smiled. "Sorry. You get like that sometimes."

"Thank you."

Hermione shook her head. "It doesn't matter what they say. I'm not going to—"

"I know you wouldn't," he interrupted sharply. "It's just that..." Harry sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose, images from his dream with Voldemort flitting through his mind. "But they're right. And it doesn't matter anymore. It doesn't matter how far away I push you or how far away I run. You're still in here." Harry tapped his heart. "And that puts you in more danger than your parents can ever hope to understand."

Hermione stared at him for a very long time. "Clearly," she whispered. "We still have some work to do on this issue."

"I guess so," Harry muttered.

Hermione sighed and sat down next to him. Hesitantly, she reached out and took his hand, entwining his fingers through hers. "Harry..."

"Hmmm...?" he managed, swallowing. "I'm sorry, I've just... does this end with kissing, by any chance?"

Hermione relaxed and smiled brightly. "You know, you'd really be much more adept at pushing me away if you could keep your hormones in check."

Harry made a face. "Sorry, can't help it. I'm a sixteen-year-old boy. I've heard it's statistically impossible."

"From who? Ron?"

"Ron? Read statistics? No... this is more of an ingrained knowledge, if you will..."

Hermione frowned at him. "Harry, really, try to focus at the issue at hand, will you?"

"Sorry," he mumbled. "I'm listening."

Hermione thought for a moment before finally saying. "Do you wish things had turned out differently between us?"

"I dunno," Harry answered honestly, avoiding her gaze.

Hermione sighed. "Harry..." she said composedly. "I'm trying to be understanding, I am. Please, I'm just asking for a little bit of... something from you in return."

"What d'you want me to say, Hermione?" he snapped. "That I'm delighted about the danger I'm putting you in? That being with you makes me happier than anything else? That I'm terrified of losing you the way I lost Sirius? You know all that."

Hermione bit her lip, but her eyes softened somewhat. "Look, the thing is, Harry... the thing is, I'll never be safe. It doesn't matter if I was Jane Doe, living in Australia, a Muggle, and as boring as possible—I'd still be in danger. Everyone person living in this planet is in danger from Voldemort. It's about choice. I won't turn my back on what's going on, I won't hide under the covers and pretend that Voldemort isn't there."

"Yes, but—"

"What you don't understand," she interrupted firmly, turning her eyes up to meet his. "Is that I'd stand by you no matter what. I know. I've seen what Voldemort is capable of. I can't turn my back on it—I won't. You can push me as far away as possible, but I'd still be there. It doesn't matter that I'm in love with you, which I am, or that you're my best friend, which you are, this is still a fight I'd be in, regardless. You could snog Cho Chang tomorrow and I'd still stand beside you." Hermione thought for a moment and added, "And then I'd kill you myself."

Harry felt such a strong wave of love and affection for the girl sitting next to him that he was momentarily speechless. Their eyes met and suddenly it didn't matter that he couldn't come up with the right words. He could see it on her face, in her eyes—she understood him and trusted him in a way that no one else did or could.

Finally, finding his voice, Harry shifted a little closer to her. "Is this the part where it ends with kissing?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "I give you a long speech about love and loyalty and the only thing you get from it is the possibility of a snog?"

"It was a very touching speech, Hermione," Harry said seriously. "And I absolutely agree with you. However, I think it's also very important to end such speeches with celebratory—"

"Snogs?" Hermione suggested wryly.

"For example, yeah."

There were a few punctuated snickers after Harry's last pronouncement, effectively ending the moment. Harry glanced wildly about, eyes landing on a group of first year girls sitting in the corner. They were huddled in a group and watching him and Hermione with great interest. He opened his mouth to tell them off but Hermione got there first.

"Honestly!" she said angrily, standing up and drawing herself up to her full height. "I'm a prefect. I won't tolerate such displays of... of... nonsense! And snooping! Go to bed!"

One of the girls flushed and stood up. "But... it's not even 8:00 yet!"

"I'm a prefect," Hermione repeated, in what Harry thought was an uncanny imitation of Percy. "It's past your bedtime if I say it's past your bedtime!"

The four girls rose, grumbling. One of them, a tiny, pixyish blonde smiled at Harry on her way up to the girl's dormitories. "We'd SO kiss you."

The girls promptly dissolved into a fit of hysterical giggles.

"Uh, thanks..." Harry said lamely, suddenly wishing he were somewhere else.

Hermione scowled. "Yeah, very witty, very smart..."

The girls giggled again, looking at each other and blushing. "You two are really cute, you know."

Harry grinned. "Yeah? You think so?"

The girls all nodded. "You've been nominated for Hogwarts' Star Couple of the Year," the blonde said, looking delighted. Like a chain reaction, the rest of the girls let out a high-pitched squeal.

"We've been what?" Hermione shrieked.

The girls stepped back. "It's... it's a new thing this year," the blonde stammered, holding up a sheet of parchment. "Let's see... you're up against Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson—no competition there." The girls looked at each other and nodded seriously. "Roger Davies and Hannah Abbott, ugh, boring... Ron Weasley and Luna Lovegood—"

"They're totally mad," one of the girls interjected. "No chance."

"Hey!" said Harry. "That's our best friend you're calling mad!" Harry glanced at Hermione, waiting for agreement.

She shuffled her feet and Harry glared at her. "Err... of course Ron's not, well, I don't mean to say that... he's not... not really, anyway..."

The girls gave her weird looks. "And, of course," the blonde continued cheerfully. "Harry Potter and Hermione Granger. There's really no chance of failure..."

The girls nodded seriously at each other again. "Practically none," one of them piped up.

"Our job to study you two," another said.

"Scope you out," a short brunette said.

"Be your bid," the blonde finished.

"Plus! We're hoping to see Harry naked!"

The girls promptly dissolved into another fit of laughter. Harry stared at the ceiling, mortified. Hermione fumed and grabbed the parchment.

"Who's inane, childish, idea was... Lavender! Lavender Brown!" Hermione crumpled the paper into a ball and turned an interesting shade of red. "I'm going to kill her. I am going to kill her!"

Harry noticed that the four girls who had started the trouble to begin with all left in a hurry when they caught sight of Hermione's fury. For a moment, he was inexplicably jealous.

"Well, don't you think..." he said carefully. "It's sort of flattering that we might win a Hogwarts' Star Couple of the Whatever award?"

This was, apparently, the wrong thing to say.

Hermione seethed. "Oh, yes," she hissed. "That would be wonderful. After everything we've been through... Hogwarts' Star Couple indeed..."

"Well, c'mon, Hermione... our competition isn't much... I'm sure we could..."

"Harry!" she said loudly. "You're missing the point!"

Harry blinked at her. "Okay... then, err... what is the point?"

"The point!" she cried, waving her arms, the ball of crumpled parchment bobbing up and down in one of her hands. "The point is... the point is..."

"Yes?"

"Well!" she sniffed, clearly determined to be irritable. "If you don't know, then I'm not going to tell you."

Harry studied her for a long time. "Really, Hermione, will you just tell me why you're so irritated?"

“You’re just all mushy because a bunch of first-years were practically throwing themselves at your feet.” Hermione bristled. “Seeing you naked! Honestly! The nerve...”

“Hermione,” Harry said, amused. “You’re jealous of a bunch of first-years?”

She frowned. “Hardly, I’m merely stating that it was...”

“Inappropriate?” Harry offered.

Hermione appeared at a loss and, instead of replying, tossed the parchment into the fire, watching in satisfaction as flames quickly engulfed it. “It’s just that...” she said softly, staring at the fire. “Don’t you think that we’re so much... more than that? After everything, saying that we’re Hogwarts’ Star Couple sounds so...” Hermione sighed and pursed her lips. “Well, I’d just like to think that we’re deeper than that, I suppose. Lavender Brown, indeed! Honestly, if that girl put as much effort into her studying as she did into her gossip...”

“You’d have a rival for the top of our class,” Harry said lightly. “It would be terrible.”

Hermione turned around. “I’m sorry, Harry,” she said, smiling. “I know I’m just being stupid.”

“You’re not being stupid,” he said quietly. “You’re right, we are more than that. But we know that. That’s all that’s important. Who cares about some stupid award? No one else can possibly understand what it’s like to be in this relationship except you and me.” Harry thought for a moment. “And possibly Ron. Poor bloke.”

Hermione laughed. “Alright—you’re right.”

Harry grinned, holding out a hand to pull her against him. “You don’t say that to me nearly enough.”

Hermione chuckled softly. “Weren’t we supposed to end something or another with kissing?”

“Yeah, I remember that. It was a good idea. Let’s do that.”

Hermione stood on tip toes so their noses brushed, her eyes wide and fixed upon his. Her breath was warm as it whistled over his chin and Harry felt his heart rate go up a notch. He traced his fingertips softly over her cheek, leaning forward until their lips brushed.

Her hands gripped the back of his neck and she was making delightful little gasping and squeaking noises. She pressed herself closer to him, her hands moving to his hair, making it even more unmanageable and messy. Her fingernails scraped his scalp, her lips still pressed to his, her tongue creeping into his mouth and his entire brain nearly short-circuited at the amount of pure feeling he was experiencing.

When they pulled away, it was with much gasping and panting. Hermione’s eyes shone as she snuggled up against him. Idly, Harry began playing with her hair, a musing look on his face. “How much do you want to bet we still have our first year audience?”

“Mmm...” Hermione said, sounding dazed and snuggling closer to him.

“Bet we’re a shoo in after that display...” Harry thought for a moment. “Maybe it would be a good idea to find a more private place to snog. What’s the library like this time of night?”

“Mmm...” Hermione said again.

Harry couldn’t quite contain the manly thrill her dazed mumblings gave him. “Awfully relaxed after that, I s’pose?”

“Don’t get all puffed up about it,” she said irritably.

“Oh, I’m sure you have quite a part in it.”

Hermione didn’t make a reply, apparently quite content to stay where she was. Harry’s mind wandered back to the letter she’d received from her parents and his stomach gave a small twist of guilt. The last thing he wanted was to be a source of contention between Hermione

and her parents. Knowing that their good mood was delicate, Harry mentally debated whether or not he should say anything.

“Err... Hermione, I’m just wondering...” Harry sighed and trailed his fingers over her cheek. She looked up at him, a small smile on her lips.

“Yes?”

“Well, it’s just that... your parents... d’you reckon that things will be okay... with them?”

Hermione tensed and pulled away from him. “Of course things won’t be okay,” she said frostily.

Harry closed his eyes. “Hermione, I’m so sorry. I never wanted—well, I didn’t want this.”

“Harry, it’s not you,” she said, her tone gentler. “They don’t—they can’t—understand. Honestly, things have been difficult already the last few years... we hardly see each other anymore. I don’t think... they really know me, who I am—they can’t, not really. Oh, don’t get me wrong, I love them very much. But they’re not... this is my life. Being a witch, being at Hogwarts, you and Ron...”

“Oh,” Harry said, very quietly. “Are you... do you regret that?”

Hermione smiled a bit wistfully. “I don’t regret this,” she said, gesturing around her. “Before I found out I was a witch... well, I was very lonely. Finding out I had magical powers was like finding out I had a purpose. It’s silly, I know, but I never felt like I fit in anywhere else. You and Ron were my first friends, did you know that?”

Harry shook his head. “Yeah, me too.”

They shared a sad smile. “I can’t ever imagine going back,” Hermione continued honestly. “But I do wish sometimes that this... thing... that separates me from my mum and dad wasn’t there.” She paused and her voice became softer. “They still think I’m going to be a doctor.”

Harry's jaw dropped. "Do they really?"

Hermione nodded. "They talk about university all the time," she admitted. "Like me being a witch is just a phase—something I'm bound to get over. I don't think they understand that my Hogwarts' transcript wouldn't be accepted at any Muggle school."

"I had no idea," Harry said. "Why haven't you told me any of this stuff before?"

Hermione shrugged. "It wasn't something we ever really talked about. Don't take this the wrong way, Harry... but it's not something that you ever have to worry about. And, Ron, well... he doesn't understand Muggles, his parents are both wizards..."

"Hermione, I'm really sorry," Harry said sincerely. "I wish that it didn't have to be that way. It sounds terrible."

"It's not," she said, smiling. "I'm not unhappy, I promise. And... I've been dealing with it for a long time. My parents love me very much, Harry. They don't understand me, but they'll always support me."

Harry nodded, accepting her words.

At that moment, a round, squeaking figure came flying in through the portrait hole, abruptly cutting off whatever reply Harry was going to make. Harry and Hermione gasped in shock, completely bewildered by the sight of Neville.

Neville took one look at them and bolted behind the couch, crouching into a tight ball. Harry and Hermione looked at each other and Harry timidly stepped towards him. Neville was shaking like a leaf and sweating so profusely that a wet spot was gathering on the back of his robes.

Neville picked up his head, eyes alighting with relief. "Oh, Harry!" he exclaimed, looking panicked. "It's Ron! He's just found out..."

Harry felt a stirring of pity. "Oh, dear... did you... did Ginny, you know... tell him?"

Neville shook his head, looking petrified. "No!" he moaned. He glanced in Hermione's direction suspiciously before turning back to Harry. He dropped his voice. "He caught us, you know... he was... guess we were in a favourite spot of his and Luna's..."

"Good, god..." Harry breathed.

"He's going to kill me!" Neville said. "Ginny and Luna both stunned him and told me to run. I dunno... I don't think I have much of a head start..."

"It's... it's okay, Neville..." Harry said uncertainly, feeling his stomach turn over.

The portrait hole burst open, and Harry cautiously backed a few steps away from the couch. Ron was standing in the entrance to the common room, anger radiating off him. In fact, Harry could only remember one other time he'd seen Ron so angry. The day he'd punched him after going to Hogsmeade with Hermione.

Harry began to think that Neville's future wasn't so bright. Ron stalked towards him, his face a fiery red and spittle flying out of the corner of his mouth.

"Where..." he gasped, eyes flashing in anger. "Where. Is. That. Smarmy. Git. Who. Touched. MY SISTER?!"

Hermione shot Harry a startled look and Harry surreptitiously stepped further away from the couch, drawing Ron's attention away from Neville's hiding form.

"Erm... are you okay, Ron? Who are you talking about?"

Ron's was gripping his wand so tightly his knuckles were turning white. "Oh, don't you dare," he snapped. "When I'm finished hexing that Longbottom into oblivion you and I are going to be having a little chat, Potter. Giving out girl advice, he says!" Ron took a dangerous step towards him. "Been talking about my sister behind her back, eh? Been giving advice to other Gryffindors about how to shag her?"

“Course not, Ron...” Harry said meekly, backing up a step.

Hermione took a tentative step towards Harry, looking fearfully in Ron’s direction. “Now, Ron...” she began soothingly. “You don’t want to do anything you’d regret later...”

Ron seethed, more spittle flying out of the corners of his mouth.

“Right,” Harry muttered. “I’m the moody one...”

“Not helping...” Hermione whispered warningly.

Ron stomped out of the common room, taking the stairs up the boys’ dormitories two at a time. Harry and Hermione stared after him, mouths slightly agape.

They looked at each other. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Harry asked, shooting the couch a worried look.

They heard a scared squeak emanate from behind it.

Hermione nodded. “Ron might do something he’d regret later?”

“Well, I’m not sure he’d regret it...” There was another terrified squeak from behind the couch. “But, yeah,” Harry said quickly. “He’s pretty fired up...”

The portrait hole swung open and Harry and Hermione whirled around, surprised to find a seething Ginny Weasley staring back at them. Much like her brother, spit was flying out of the corner of her mouth, and her chest was rising and falling in tune with her panting breaths.

“Where is he?” she demanded, staring at them furiously.

Simultaneously, Harry and Hermione took a step backwards.

“Uh...” Harry said.

“Who, Ginny?” Hermione said, sounding faint.

“My brother!” Ginny shrieked, stamping her foot. “That stupid git who’s going to ruin my chance with Neville before it’s even happened! I am going to kill him!”

There was another squeak from behind the couch, but Ginny was too riled up to notice.

Soundlessly, Harry and Hermione pointed in the direction of the boys’ dormitories. Ginny, after much more spitting, stalked loudly up the stairs, wand pointed out in front of her.

“RON WEASLEY!” She yelled. “I’VE HAD JUST ABOUT ENOUGH OF YOUR INTERFERENCE....”

Harry was very much relieved when Ginny entered the dormitory and they could no longer hear her. The common room seemed deathly quiet all of a sudden without the commotion and Harry exchanged an uncertain look with Hermione before glancing warily up the stairs again.

Neville emerged from his hiding place, still sweating and trembling like a leaf. There was an unmistakable shine in his eyes, however.

“Did you hear that?” Neville breathed. “She likes me.”

Hermione shot him an amused look. “Of course she does, Neville. She kissed you, didn’t she?” Hermione winked at him. “I heard she even slipped you—”

Neville blushed furiously and nearly fell over. “How did you know that?” he sputtered. “Who told you that?”

Harry suddenly became very interested in looking at the ceiling. He narrowed his eyes, pointing at it. “Hey...” he said. “Is it just me or is the ceiling moving?”

CRASH!

The ceiling visibly shook and bits of paint and dust cascaded down upon their heads.

Harry rubbed his head. "Never should ask..." he muttered. "Never ask..."

Hermione sent him a sympathetic look as she combed paint chips out of her hair.

Neville looked positively faint with anxiety. He gave the ceiling a horrified look before quickly settling his eyes elsewhere. "You two won't let Ron kill me... right?"

"Of course not, Neville," Hermione said, looking rather skeptical.

BANG!

More pieces of paint rained down on their heads. Harry sighed painfully, shaking his head to clear all the paint out of his hair. He shot the ceiling a contemptuous look, silently cursing Ron and Ginny.

He glanced at Hermione, smiling a little when he caught sight of a small chip of white paint on her nose. "Hermione," he said, gesturing to his nose. "Paint."

"Oh?" she said, blinking her eyes at him. "Really? Someone should probably get that for me."

"Yeah? Like who?"

"I'm not sure," Hermione said vaguely. "Someone brave, smart... always there to help a girl out of dangerous situations..."

"Here," Neville said. "I've got it."

Harry started coughing to cover up for his snort of laughter, while Hermione flushed in embarrassment. "Thanks, Neville," she managed.

"No problem," Neville answered absently.

Hermione rolled her eyes in Harry's direction, still looking rather embarrassed. She dropped her voice, glancing at Neville, who was studiously looking at the floor. "You're right," she muttered. "We should find a quieter place to snog..." Seeing the look on his face, she frowned. "And if you say the Room of Requirement, I will be forced hex you. Merlin only knows what it'll turn into if you walk in there..."

"You're not even the tiniest bit curious—"

"No."

CRASH! BANG!

"Do you think we should go up there?" Hermione said, looking troubled.

Harry glanced at the stairs. "No way," he said immediately. "This is family stuff, Hermione. No way we want to get in the middle of that. It's Weasley stuff. They all have such a temper..."

"It's that flaming red hair that does it..."

They smiled at each other and Neville cleared his throat, shuffling his feet. "Um," he said. "I just want you to know... you're definitely a shoo in for Hogwarts' Star Couple of the Year. I mean..." he cleared his throat. "I'd vote for you, at least."

Seeing the look of intense fury that passed over Hermione's features, Harry quickly jumped to answer. "Thanks, Neville. We appreciate that."

With what looked like a great struggle, Hermione managed to refrain from commenting.

The three of them looked up when Ginny and Ron came back down the stairs. Ron appeared to be limping somewhat, but Ginny looked relatively unscathed. She beamed happily and smiled warmly in Neville's direction.

With what looked like physical pain, Ron approached Neville slowly, his jaw clenching. Ron thrust out his hand, teeth gnawing together. "Neville," he said in a robotic voice. "I'm delighted by the news that you're snogging my sister. What a wonderful thing to have happened. Please accept my congratulations."

With great trepidation, Neville shook his hand, looking like a deer-caught in the headlights. "Thanks, Ron..." he stumbled. "I mean, I know it must be kind of a shock, but I really like her and I promise that you won't ever have to see what you saw ever again..." Neville trailed off when Ron's grip on his hand visibly tightened. "Anyway," Neville continued in a high-pitched voice, turning pale. "Your support means a lot."

Wearing a fake smile, Ron released his hand before turning to Harry. His eyes narrowed. "Let's take this outside, Potter," he growled.

Hermione shot Harry a fearful look. "Ron," she said faintly. "Maybe this isn't such—".

"It's okay, Hermione," Harry said, meeting Ron's gaze.

Hermione wrung her hands. "Oh—I—don't you two do something stupid...."

Ron didn't even blink. "Let's go, Potter."

"Lead the way, Weasley."

Braced for the worst, Harry followed Ron's angry steps out of the portrait hole. Ron kept going, walking until they were outside the castle. Harry stayed a few steps behind him, mind racing. Well, he wasn't about to let Ron punch him, or take him in a duel again—that much was certain. He'd already let Ron win enough this year, as it was. Harry had his own reputation to uphold. Besides, he hadn't really done anything wrong this time.

Ron stopped suddenly and Harry nearly plowed right into him. He sidestepped quickly, ducking instinctively in case Ron was about to

throw his fist towards his head. To his amazement, Ron merely stared at him.

“Harry,” he said shortly. “What are you doing?”

“Err... I was, uh...” Harry looked around. “Ducking?”

Ron scowled at him. “Harry, what kind of person do you think I am? I don’t just go around punching people, you know.”

Harry blinked. “Sure, Ron.”

Ron huffed out a sigh and rubbed the back of his neck. “So Ginny and Neville, eh?” he said conversationally.

Harry, more than a little confused, merely nodded, unwilling to do something to further spark Ron’s temper.

“So... what do you, err...” Ron swallowed. “What do you think about them?”

It suddenly occurred to Harry that Ron hadn’t brought him outside to fight, after all. In fact, Harry was somewhat surprised to find that Ron probably just needed to someone to talk to. However, Harry also thought it was in his best interests to tread carefully. “Dunno what I think about them, Ron.”

Ron nodded approvingly. “Exactly!” he said. “You know, we’ve shared a room with that Longbottom for almost six years now, but what do we really know about him?” Ron narrowed his eyes. “You don’t know anything, do you?”

“Of course not, Ron.”

Mollified, Ron nodded again, looking distinctly warmer. “Harry, you know... imagine this... apparently, Ginny thinks that I’m somewhat... possessive...”

“No...”

Ron nodded gravely. "I mean, I s'pose I can be rather... protective..."

"Really?"

"Only sometimes," Ron said, rather defensively. "It's just... it's Ginny... she's so young..."

Harry resisted the rather strong urge he had to point out that Ginny was only a year younger than them.

"Anyway," Ron said, clearing his throat. "Maybe... maybe it won't be so bad if she's with Neville. I mean, he's right frightened of me, isn't he?"

"Absolutely terrified."

Ron looked cheered up. "Hey, you know, Harry, this could be fun. Next time Neville's late for anything, all I'll have to do is glare and ask him if he's been spending time around my sister."

"Hmm..." Harry said, in a noncommittal tone. "You know, Ron... I think he really likes her."

Ron jerked a shoulder. "Yeah? Well—I guess Neville's a nice enough fellow." Ron sighed and turned his eyes to the ground. "You know, Harry..." he said quietly. "I s'pose I just always hoped that you would..."

"Oh," Harry said, feeling uncomfortable. "Well... that's not... I mean, I'm with Hermione... I love Hermione. And even if I wasn't—"

Ron waved a hand. "I know. I was just trying to explain why I was acting like such...."

"A prat?" Harry filled in helpfully.

"A prat," Ron said heavily, before meeting his eyes. "But if you ever give out girl advice about my sister again, I will kill you."

"Right," Harry said, shifting a little. "Glad that's covered."

They slowly walked back up to the castle, Ron in a much better mood. "Looks like things with Hermione are going well."

Harry folded his arms over his chest. "Yeah," he said kicking at a stone. "She's... I don't know what I'd do without her, Ron."

Ron's voice was quiet. "It's a good thing I don't have to worry about her turning you into a giant sap or anything."

Though Ron's tone was light, Harry was surprised by the bitter undertones he heard. Figuring it was just his imagination, Harry grinned sideways at his friend. "Plus, she's a really good kisser. Did I mention that? Because that helps, too."

"Didn't mention that, no... but it's really not that hard to, Hermione!"

Harry's eyes widened and both he and Ron came to a stumbling stop just inside the entrance. Hermione was sitting, wand balanced on knees pulled up to her chest, and back pressed against the wall. She stared at them blandly as they approached. "Why, hello," she greeted. "Fancy meeting the two of you here."

"Hermione," Harry said slowly. "What are you doing here?"

She blew out a breath. "Well, I was—don't take this wrong way or anything, Harry—but I was worried."

"Worried?" Harry repeated.

"Well, yes, I suppose..." she said slowly, eyes ticking nervously to Ron. "I thought that maybe... Ron would... perhaps..."

"Beat the living daylights out of him?" Ron suggested, sounding entirely too cheerful by the prospect.

Hermione flushed and merely nodded.

"What?" Harry exploded. "Ron couldn't beat the living daylights out of me!"

Hermione chewed her bottom lip. "Oh, I know, but... Ron... you do get awfully riled up sometimes..." Ron's face turned red and Hermione rushed to continue. "I just thought I'd make sure the two of you didn't get expelled."

"Ron couldn't beat the living daylights out of me!" Harry repeated loudly.

Ron shot him an irritated look and shook his head. "Can you believe him?" he said to Hermione. "He's still in denial."

Hermione frowned. "Well," she said primly. "He certainly wasn't the one that went tearing through the common room, destroying property, and ruining my evening."

"Huh," Ron said, blushing. "Fancy that."

Harry couldn't help the smirk he threw in Ron's direction. "Get beat up by your sister, Ron?"

Ron blushed an even deeper shade of red. "That's none of your business," he muttered, dropping down to sit next to Hermione.

Harry settled down on her other side. For a moment, the three of them did nothing but stare at the grounds, each lost in their own thoughts.

"This floor is quite uncomfortable," Ron finally said, shifting back and forth. "And also rather cold. Pleasant resting spot, Hermione."

"Well—if you don't like it—"

"Then I can just leave," Ron finished tiredly, shifting a little more. "Bloody hell, I think my buttocks are freezing up..."

"Ron!"

"Sorry."

“Do you really think Ron could beat the living daylights out of me?” Harry mumbled.

“Oh, Harry, stop obsessing.”

“I’m not obsessing.”

“Sure you’re not, mate.”

“You stay out of this,” Harry said witheringly, glaring at Ron.

“It’s almost like he doesn’t care about my opinion,” Ron muttered to Hermione, trying to affect a wounded countenance.

Hermione rolled her eyes and heaved a great sigh, as if she was fed up with both of them. Absently, she patted Harry on the arm. “Of course I think you could hold your own in a duel, Harry.”

Harry was less than reassured. “Yeah? Hold my own, how?”

“Well...” Hermione said thoughtfully. “You’re pretty good when you’re up against Voldemort...”

Ron gave a mock shudder. “Would you stop, Hermione?”

“Honestly, Ron, last time I checked, saying Voldemort’s name hardly caused a rain of fire.”

“You never know,” Ron mumbled. “It could.”

“So... just against Voldemort, then?” Harry asked, vaguely wondering when Hermione’s opinion had become this important to him. “You don’t think I could take on anyone else?”

“Harry, you’re a very effective dueler,” Hermione said. “Now stop obsessing.”

“Yeah, but are you just saying that? Or d’you really mean it?”

Instead of answering, Hermione turned to Ron. "Do you know," she said quietly. "Harry's eyebrow still twitches whenever someone mentions we're a couple."

"WHAT?" Harry yelled at the same time that Ron said, "Really?"

"Oh, yes," Hermione said knowingly. "It's very interesting, really."

"What?" Harry said again, affronted. "My eyebrow does not twitch."

Ron cocked his head. "Hey, Harry... hear the news that you and Hermione were a... couple?" Ron studied Harry curiously before nodding profusely, looking highly amused. "Yep. It twitches."

Harry scowled. "You two are making this—"

"Couple," Ron said again. "Ha! It twitched again!"

"Shut it."

"You're going to get married and have babies... Oi! Hermione, look at it go!"

"I swear to you, Ron, if you don't shut up this very instant I'm going to..."

"COUPLE!"

"THAT'S IT!"

Ron started snickering and, much to his chagrin, Harry felt his mouth twitching in return. Turning to Hermione, Ron raised his eyebrows. "And this doesn't bother you, Hermione?"

"Oh, Harry loves me very much," she said calmly. "He's just terrified by it."

"Do not," Harry muttered. "Love you. Not right now, anyway."

Hermione gave a long suffering and sigh and looked at Ron. "He's joking."

"I dunno, Hermione..." Ron said seriously, studying Harry. "He looks awfully upset..."

Hermione turned around and studied him. "Is awfully pale, isn't he?"

"OKAY!" Harry said. "Did I miss the bulletin? I didn't realize it was Pick on Potter day!"

"Nice alliteration," Hermione said approvingly.

"Excuse me?" Ron asked.

"Alliteration," Hermione snapped. "It's when—oh, never mind...." She turned to Harry. "You love me."

"I do not."

Hermione grinned and turned back to Ron. "He loves me."

Ron looked back and forth between them. "Yep, totally smitten."

Harry folded his arms over his chest. "I don't love either of you."

Hermione leaned her chin on his shoulder, curling her fingers on her arm. Widening her eyes, she met his gaze and, though Harry knew exactly what she was doing, he felt his resolve crumble. "Harry..." she whispered.

"Err... hmm?"

She blinked. "You love me."

"Well, okay..." he mumbled. "You, I love a little..."

Ron coughed, making a noise that sounded suspiciously like "goo-goo eyes!"

"It's not really Pick on Potter day..." Hermione said slowly, eyes furrowing into a little frown.

"However," Ron said brightly. "That can be arranged..."

Harry felt his heart turn over as he stared into Hermione's wide, plaintive eyes. Slowly, he reached up, stroking a hand down her hair. For the first time, he was really struck by the thought that things were going to be okay. He was startled for a moment, realizing that he'd been waiting, ever since that first innocent kiss in the common room, for the disaster that would end it and rip them apart. And he realized that maybe, just maybe, that disaster would never come.

Hermione looked at him questioningly, her small fingers tightening their grip on his arm. He smiled softly at her, leaning forward until his lips brushed her forehead, causing Ron to release several loud grunts of disgust.

Things really were okay.

He had Hermione's support, friendship, and love on one side and he had Ron's loyalty, friendship, and love on the other. And, despite what he had said earlier, he did love them both. Very much.

“You wanted to see me about something, Harry?”

Harry blinked at Dumbledore, who was sitting across from him at his desk. Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, Harry slouched down in his chair and tried not to look the headmaster in the eye. “Yeah, err... I had a dream...”

Dumbledore leaned forward, the good humor disappearing from his eyes. “When?”

“When I was in the hospital, right before Madam Pomfrey released me,” Harry paused before continuing, feeling somewhat silly sharing a dream with Dumbledore. “Voldemort was there... I think that he was trying to get me to tell him the prophecy. But it was... different from the... other dreams.”

“Hmmm,” Dumbledore said mildly, seeming to know exactly what Harry meant. “Why don’t you tell me about it.”

Harry did, leaving out large portions of what had happened before he met Voldemort. When he finished his account, Dumbledore stared off into space for a very long time, an unreadable expression on his face. Harry cleared his throat, eager for Dumbledore’s input.

Slowly Dumbledore shifted his eyes to Harry’s face. “Voldemort is desperate to learn what was in that prophecy.”

Harry felt a flash of indignation. “Well... yeah,” he said, struggling to maintain his composure. “I know that. I just... thought you should know about what he said, is all.”

Dumbledore let out a long sigh. “The time is coming, Harry, when you won’t be able to come to me for all the answers you seek.”

Realizing that Dumbledore had almost unknowingly echoed his own part in Harry’s dream, Harry felt a crushing disappointment. Dumbledore would be little help in deciphering Harry’s strange dream. “It felt... real, everything that happened, the time I spent there. I’m not sure who was in control... him or me...”

"Your connection to Voldemort is something that even I don't fully understand, Harry. It is a connection that you are both battling for control in. Voldemort is beginning to understand that controlling your subconscious is not as easy as he hoped. You're stronger than you believe yourself to be."

Harry blinked, thinking. "How do I make it more difficult for him, Professor? I can't... I don't think this is something I can lose..."

The headmaster heaved a long sigh and leaned back in his chair, eyebrows furrowed as he thought. "I think that, perhaps, the time has come for you to determine that on your own."

"But—"

"I do not know, Harry," Dumbledore cut in, the regret evident in his voice. "I don't know."

A lump gathering in his throat, Harry kept his gaze on Dumbledore, feeling a sense of urgency rising in him. "Professor," he said quietly. "Do you think that Voldemort's going to... this summer... Hermione'll be unprotected and..."

Dumbledore lifted a hand to silence him. "I've thought of that. Several protective wards are being placed around the Granger's residence."

"Several?" Harry repeated. "That's hardly... Voldemort threatened her. He knows that I'd do anything if she..." Harry trailed off, suddenly embarrassed.

The headmaster seemed old and tired as he slowly got up from his desk and began pacing his office. "I'm well aware of that, Harry, just as Voldemort is. Your love for other people has long been what Voldemort has used against you time and again."

"I know," Harry said, beginning to get frustrated. "But this is different. This is... I don't know what I'd..."

Again, Dumbledore merely lifted a hand to silence Harry's angry tirade. "There's not much I can tell you that you don't already know,

Harry.” Dumbledore paused, seeming to grow older with each passing minute. “You’re growing up quickly, more so every year. What do I have left to reassure you with? What wisdom can I possibly give you?”

Harry stared at him soundlessly, thousands of questions on his lips. To Harry, Dumbledore had long held the answers to even the most impossible questions, a never-ending void of knowledge and wisdom. Yet, here he was, telling Harry that he had nothing left to give, that he was old enough to make up his own mind.

“Is Hermione...” Harry began hesitantly, suddenly desperate for Dumbledore’s keen insight. “Do you reckon that it’s... that we’re... that we.... I mean to say, that my loving her is...”

“Is exactly what makes you strong and what makes you weak, Harry. She is your greatest strength, yet your greatest weakness.” Dumbledore’s eyes crinkled in sympathy. “I must say, at first I was quite concerned that Miss Granger had become your blind spot. However, as time wore on... it became apparent that it was her you’d ultimately need to defeat Voldemort.”

“I don’t care if he knows,” Harry said suddenly. “About the prophecy. Maybe then we could finally get it over with.”

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore said serenely. “Or perhaps it would only bolster Voldemort’s desire to kill you.”

Harry shrugged a shoulder, feeling a sudden apathy towards the entire situation. “Yeah, ‘cause that’d be wildly different from all the times he’s tried to kill me in the past.”

Dumbledore’s blue eyes twinkled slightly and Harry was relieved to see some of the old humour return to him. “It’s your judgment call, Harry. Bear in mind, however, that Voldemort’s first concern is and always will be his own self-protection.”

Harry returned slowly to Gryffindor tower. Exams were only days away. Hermione nearly had an aneurysm when she'd learned he was taking an hour break from studying to speak with Dumbledore. Exam stress did not make Hermione the most pleasant person to be around and Harry silently resolved to drag her away from her books for a little while. It had been a long time since they'd had silent time together and, after his talk with Dumbledore, he found himself craving the simple comfort of her presence.

Reaching the Fat Lady, Harry was surprised when the portrait swung open and a familiar red headed sight greeted him. Ron's face was completely hidden behind two broomsticks, one of which was Harry's Firebolt.

"Ron..." Harry said, somewhat surprised. "What're you doing?"

Ron shoved Harry's broomstick at him. "C'mon," he said. "Fancy a game of pick-up? Seamus and Dean said they'd meet us out there."

"Err..." Harry said, disturbed to find that the prospect of Quidditch did little to entice him. "I'm not sure if..."

"Harry," Ron cut in, looking a little irritated. "I've been waiting on your for ages. Nicked your Maurader's Map, wanted to see what was taking so long. I knew I had to cut you off before Hermione found you. She's on a steaming rampage, I reckon she thinks that you purposely went to see Dumbledore to annoy her."

Not finding the prospect of having Hermione annoyed with him particularly appealing, Harry made to go around Ron, slightly angry when he refused to move out his way. "Ron, I'm not in the mood, okay? Maybe after exams..."

"That's three weeks, Harry! It's just one game of Quidditch! It's not going to bloody do you in!"

Momentarily stunned by the anger in Ron's voice, Harry took a step back. "I'm sorry, Ron. I just don't feel like it."

Ron's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Are you going to go study some more?"

Harry shrugged. "Dunno. Thought maybe me and Hermione could go for a walk."

Harry knew that he'd made a mistake as soon as the words left his mouth. Ron chucked his broom at the wall, his face beginning to get flushed. "Oh, is that it?" Ron snapped. "You can go for a walk with Hermione, but you can't be bothered to head down to the Quidditch pitch?"

"C'mon, Ron, what's gotten into you?" Harry said, desperate to get out of the situation. "I've had a long afternoon, okay? I just need a bit of quiet."

"Well, fine!" Ron yelled. "Quidditch can be quiet, you know!"

"No it can't," Harry yelled back. "Besides, I just told you, I don't feel like playing Quidditch."

Ron let out a hollow laugh. "That's bull, Harry. You just want to spend all your free time with Hermione—like you always do. It's not enough that you eat together, that you study together, whatever free time the pair of you have is spent taking nice long walks around the lake! What if I wanted to go, Harry? What then? Would you tell me that walking with three people is too loud?"

"Of course not, Ron," Harry said impatiently. "But you haven't been around much, either. You're with Luna practically every night. So don't blame this all on us."

"I've been with Luna because when you two are together you don't notice that I'm there! I could disappear for all you'd care!" Ron stopped, breathing hard. "Face it, Harry. Things have changed. You don't... I'm not the best friend that you used to need."

"For Merlin's sake, Ron! There's no need to get all dramatic about it! That's hardly the truth. You and Hermione are the only people in my life that I—"

“Hermione’s the only person in your life that you need!” Ron bellowed, face turning a deeper shade of red. “I’m so tired of only being needed when you’re not around each other! We used to be a trio! We used to be inseparable! You wanna know what we are now, Harry? We are nothing. It’s Harry and Hermione, and Ron. Don’t you see that?”

“Of course it’s Hermione and Harry!” Harry shouted, taking a step closer to Ron and bawling his fists. “I’m not sure if you noticed, but Hermione’s my girlfriend. If you want to carry on about how left out that makes you feel then fine. I don’t care. But you know what, Ron? You’re a prat if you think your friendship suddenly means nothing to me.”

Ron looked dangerously close to punching him and Harry almost hoped that he would, just so he could have an excuse to release some of his own built-up anger. “Well, what else am I supposed to think, Harry? For all you care, I could disappear and you wouldn’t even notice!”

“You don’t really think that,” Harry said in a low voice.

That gave Ron pause. “I don’t know what I think,” he admitted, seeming to gather himself together. He picked up his fallen broom before turning back to Harry. “For a long time it was difficult to live in your shadow. But I never thought... I never thought I’d have to live in her shadow.”

Without another word, Ron hefted his broom over his shoulder and headed down the corridor. Drained, Harry turned back to the portrait hole, where the Fat Lady had fallen asleep.

“Podfungus,” Harry said loudly, waking her up.

The Fat Lady gave a startled jump and narrowed her eyes at Harry. “Finally done shouting, I see,” she sniffed.

With a grunt, Harry entered the Gryffindor common room, tiredly swinging his Firebolt in one hand. He returned it to his dormitory, taking a bit longer than was necessary before returning to the

Gryffindor common room. There, he surveyed his surroundings, unsurprised to see a familiar head of bushy hair bent obsessively over a book. He smiled a little to himself, resolving to get both of them out of the castle.

“Hey,” he said quietly, reaching her side.

Hermione’s eyes finished scanning the page she was reading before slowly raising her head. Her eyes were blurry and a small spot of ink had collected on her right cheek. Harry smiled, rubbing his thumb over the ink spot until it vanished.

“Hey,” she said drowsily, yawning a little. “Don’t think that you can save yourself from a lecture just because you’re smiling all cute and sheepishly at me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Well—good, because I’ve been waiting here for the last two hours, Harry, and exams are only...” Hermione trailed off, focusing on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“Lots of things, actually,” Harry said honestly. “Do you think... I know you’re busy, but... will you come for a walk with me?”

“I...” Hermione glanced down at her books and seemed to struggle with herself for a moment. Frowning, she resolutely shut her book before standing up. “Of course I will, Harry.”

He smiled gratefully, taking her hand. Outside the castle, they silently made their way to the lake. The sun had just set and the darkening sky cast ominous shadows around them.

The water was a still and dark pool and the quiet was broken only by the hooting of an owl from somewhere within the Forbidden Forest.

Her curiosity getting the better of her, Hermione gently tugged on his hand to bring him to a stop. “What’s going on, Harry?”

Instead of answering, Harry tipped her chin up and leaned down to kiss her. All other thoughts flew from his brain as their lips met. He concentrated on the feel of her in his arms, the soft touch of her lips against his, and the peace that settled down around him as they kissed.

He wasn't sure how long they kissed for, only that time stopped having meaning. While they kissed, nothing else mattered. Finally, Hermione's insistent pushing on his chest broke the spell and he pulled away, feeling slightly dizzy.

"You..." she said, her breath coming out in short gasps. "Are avoiding the question."

Her cheeks were slightly flushed and her lips swollen from their long snog. Harry cupped her cheek with his palm, her skin feeling warm against his hand. "Uh huh," he finally responded, leaning forward to kiss her again.

"Harry," she managed to say sternly, between kisses. "You're... should... what's... tell... me... going... on..."

They broke apart and Harry felt the last few hours settle with a heavy weight on his mind. He took a deep breath to clear his head and reluctantly pulled himself out of the shelter of her arms. Hermione reached for him, frowning a little when he continued to back away.

"Harry, I swear to God, if you don't tell me what's troubling you this very instant, I'm going to—"

"To what, Hermione?" he said, voice harsher than he intended. "Maybe it's not any of your business."

She flinched, but met his eyes. "Well," she said calmly. "I'm assuming that you took me out here because you wanted to talk. Because, quite frankly, if you were only using me as a way to keep your mind off things, then I'm going back inside."

Harry shoved his hands in his pockets. "I do want to talk," he said quietly.

“Good,” Hermione said, swallowing hard. “Then we don’t have a problem.”

Harry clenched his jaw. “I’m sorry,” he finally said. “I didn’t mean to snap at you. Or to make you feel like I was just snogging you to escape dealing with everything.”

“That’s alright,” she said gently. “Now, please, Harry... just tell me what’s going on.”

Harry nodded glumly. He started with the strange dream he’d had in the hospital wing, relating to her every encounter he’d had in it, right up to his meeting with Voldemort. Though her eyes widened in several parts, she didn’t once interrupt. He told her about his meeting with Dumbledore and the Headmaster’s insistence that he could no longer give Harry the advice he needed. Finally, he ended with the meeting he’d had with Ron outside the portrait hole. She gasped when he told her the words they’d exchanged, but she still did not interrupt.

Harry gratefully let the words pour out of him, relaxing as he continued the story. Hermione had settled herself down in the grass at some point, but kept her eyes trained on his face as he recounted everything that had been happening. When Harry finished, he realized that he’d been pacing and he suddenly felt ridiculous, standing there, waiting for her to respond. Unable to meet her gaze, he started kicking at pebbles on the ground in order to vent his anger.

“Harry...” Hermione’s voice was soft, but calm. “Harry, it’s okay...”

“It’s not okay!” he said loudly, kicking a pebble with more force than was necessary. “Nothing’s okay! Ron hates me! Dumbledore can’t help me! Voldemort’s controlling my dreams! It’s not okay.”

“Ron doesn’t hate you,” Hermione said, a little bit of amusement in her voice. “He’s just jealous, but he certainly doesn’t hate you.”

“Then I’m tired of him being jealous!”

“Honestly, I’m not all that surprised—don’t you see, Harry? It’s difficult for him—he’s been your best friend for so many years...” Hermione thought for a moment. “I suppose he feels like I’m taking away his place in your life.”

Harry scowled. “I don’t care, okay? It’s not my job to constantly reassure him!”

Hermione sighed. “No, it’s not, but...”

“I’ve got other things to deal with!” Harry burst in furiously. “I’ve got... I’m just so tired of it all...”

Hermione’s hand was on his arm and Harry finally raised his head to meet her eyes. She smiled softly at him, her eyes warm and calm. Barely aware of what he was doing, Harry pulled her closer. He pressed his face to her neck, releasing a long breath when her fingers gently came up to comb through his hair.

“Harry...” she murmured. “I promise you, one day... it’ll all be okay...”

Harry closed his eyes, allowing the simple pleasure of Hermione’s comfort to wash over him. As before, time ceased to have meaning. He was only aware of his beating heart and the way he could hear each breath that passed through her body.

“I wish so much,” Hermione whispered. “That you didn’t have to feel all the pain that you do, that things had been easier for you. I wish that you weren’t Harry Potter... I wish it was someone else who had your responsibility.” Hermione paused, her fingers stilling in his hair as she prepared herself for her next words. “But... at the same time... how can I? How can I wish to take away everything that makes you the person you are?”

Harry pulled away from the warmth of her embrace, staring at her in disbelief. “The person that I am? Hermione, I’m not anything special! I’m grumpy and stupid and I make loads of stupid mistakes...”

“And I love you,” she said calmly. “For who you are. I know you don’t see yourself as much, Harry, but you’re everything to...” Hermione

stopped herself and smiled apologetically. "Remember when you saved an irritating know-it-all from a troll when you were only 11-years-old?"

"Oh, well..." Harry said, beginning to feel embarrassed. "Ron also—"

"Came because you made him," Hermione said, still smiling. "I knew, from that day on, that I was going to stand next to you in whatever you faced because you'd never run or try to pass the difficult stuff off on someone else."

Harry swallowed, amazed by her absolute faith in him. Taking her hand, he slowly rubbed his thumb in circular motions over the back of her hand. "Hermione..."

"Shhh, it's okay," she said quietly. "You don't have to say anything. I know."

Harry nodded mutely. By unspoken agreement, they decided to return to the castle. They walked without speaking, but Harry felt as though a giant weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

They entered the castle, the halls dark and abandoned. Harry gave Hermione a sheepish smile. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Guess I talked a little longer than I thought. You don't mind, do you?"

Hermione waved a hand. "Harry, I've been your friend for six years. If I haven't learned to break the rules by now then I'm terribly afraid that we just won't ever work out."

They shared a smile and stealthily crept along the hall, trying to be as low key as possible. "I'm a prefect, you know," Hermione said softly. "I could lose my badge for taking these late night snogs."

"Talks."

"Oh, that's right. When we get caught for being out after hours, we'll just explain to Professor McGonagall that you needed to talk. I'm sure she'll be perfectly understanding."

Harry stopped and frowned at her. "Sarcasm is not appreciated."

"I was hardly being sarcastic, merely pointing out the reality of the... what are you doing?"

Harry grinned and steered her up against the wall, his hands settling themselves on her hips as he pushed up against her. "Well—if we're going to get in trouble for snogging—might as well make it warranted..."

Hermione giggled and managed to put up a decent show of trying to look irritated with him. "Harry, we have to set an example, you know..."

"Yeah..." he said easily, leaning forward until he could feel her breath against his nose. "Let's do that..."

"Not..." she said haltingly. "This kind of an example..."

"And what example should we be presenting, then?" Harry asked innocently.

"Well..." Hermione said hesitantly, her resolve quickly crumbling. "That's... uh..."

"Yeah?" Harry prompted, even as her arms wound around his neck to pull him closer to her.

Their lips were a hairsbreadth away when a low chuckle shattered the moment. The noise sent a shiver down his spine and Hermione let out loud gasp. Slowly, Harry turned around, trepidation creeping over him.

Malfoy. Only it wasn't just Malfoy, he'd brought an entire gang of Slytherins with him. Harry recognized Crabbe and Goyle standing by his elbows, but there were at least four or five others he'd never met. In typical Slytherin fashion, what they lacked in brains they made up for in sheer massive bulk. Malfoy was standing in front of them, a large, cocky smile spreading across his face.

“Well, well, well,” he said slowly, looking delighted. “Hardly an appropriate display for a Gryffindor prefect, Miss Granger. Good thing we put a stop to it before things got out of hand.”

Harry heard Hermione take in a sharp breath. “Harry,” she whispered, sounding frantic. “My wand... it’s gone...”

Keeping his eyes on Malfoy, Harry surreptitiously checked for his own wand, unsurprised to find that it was missing from his pocket. He felt his heart rate go up a notch, the danger of their situation beginning to sink in. Without their wands, he and Hermione were all but powerless. Physically, they were no match against the much larger Slytherins.

Malfoy’s eyes were glowing. ‘He planned this,’ Harry thought. ‘He knows, he knows that we can’t find our wands and he’s savouring putting us in this position.’ For a long time, Malfoy did nothing but stare, pure joy written on his face. As the seconds ticked by, Harry found himself growing increasingly nervous. There was pure malice written on Malfoy’s face and the rest of the Slytherins were quivering with barely concealed eagerness. They were surrounded, backed up against a wall, and at that moment it didn’t matter that Harry had fought Lord Voldemort himself, he felt the helplessness of the situation press down upon him.

Hermione seemed to come to the same conclusion he did, he could feel her body begin to tremble. She was gripping his arm with force that was painful. Malfoy continued to watch them, his smile widening in anticipation.

“Malfoy,” Harry said, trying to keep his voice perfectly controlled. “We don’t want any trouble.”

Malfoy took a step closer to him. “Is that fear I sense, Potter?”

“Of you?” Harry said, raising his eyebrows. “If you remember correctly, I’m the reason that your daddy’s in jail. I hardly think you’re going to be much more dangerous.”

“Oh, Harry, don’t...” Hermione moaned faintly, gripping his arm even tighter.

Malfoy's eyes glinted, flickering over to Hermione before settling back on Harry. "About that," he said, taking a few steps closer to them. "I never really thanked you properly. Father taught me to always stand by your family."

Harry felt his stomach drop as tendrils of fear began to creep inside him. Instead of answering, he glared at Malfoy, praying that someone would find them. Snape, anyone, because the look in Malfoy's eyes told him that the Slytherin wanted revenge.

"I suppose you've noticed by now," Malfoy said conversationally. "That you've both misplaced something rather important." Slowly, Malfoy withdrew two objects from his robe, which Harry quickly identified as his and Hermione's wands.

"Stealing a witch or wizard's wand is a crime, Malfoy," Hermione said, voice controlled. "This time you've gone too far."

Malfoy laughed and, after a moment, the rest of his Slytherin gang joined him. "I promise you, Granger, that we will be committing much more serious offenses tonight than stealing your wand."

"Touch her, Malfoy, and I will kill you."

Harry was surprised by the steel in his voice, though he had meant every word. The Slytherins looked a little startled by his dark tone, stopping their laughter and glancing questioningly at each other. Malfoy merely smiled wider, approaching Harry until they were staring eye-to-eye with each other.

"Careful, Potter," he spat. "You're fondness for the Mudblood might be used as a weakness."

If Hermione hadn't been gripping his arm with such terrified force, Harry probably would have launched himself at Malfoy. But despite the roaring in his ears, Harry stayed where he was, determined not to leave Hermione vulnerable.

“You’re vile, Malfoy,” Hermione said in a choked voice. “Absolutely horrid! Ambushing us in the middle of the night, you know you outnumber us! Taking away our only ability to defend ourselves...” Hermione trailed off and steadied herself. She dropped her voice. “You’re a coward—you’re nothing more than a coward.”

Harry could tell that Hermione had struck a nerve. The smile vanished from Malfoy’s face and he backed up several paces, his fists clenching. Harry’s heart began to pound. Sudden worry for Hermione had him back up against her, trying as best he could to shield her from harm.

Malfoy glared at his gang of Slytherins. “What are you doing?” he demanded, gesturing angrily. “Go! Grab them! Seize them! Whatever... just do it!”

Harry’s worry turned to nearly full-blown panic. He bawled his fists, intending on doing something, anything to defend himself. It was only Hermione that snapped him out of his momentary panic.

“Don’t fight them,” she whispered, letting go of his arm. “You’ll only provoke them further. It’s what Malfoy wants. I know you feel you have to protect me, Harry, but you can’t beat them physically. You know you can’t.”

Harry knew she was right. Swallowing hard, he allowed his arms to drop uselessly by his sides, not putting up a fight when two large, meaty Slytherins grabbed him by the upper arms and wrenched him away from Hermione’s side. They slammed him against the wall on the other side of the hall, keeping a firm hold on his arms. Malfoy looked disappointed that he hadn’t put up a struggle, but watched Harry hopefully as Goyle easily twisted Hermione’s wrists behind her back and held on with one hand.

Hermione winced a little in pain and Harry felt his anger soar to new levels. It took all his self-control to hold himself in place.

“Malfoy, of all the stupid things you’ve ever done...” Hermione’s voice was trembling and she took a deep, steadying breath. “This is, by far, the stupidest. Do you really think that no one’s going to notice that

Harry and I are missing? Do you really think that you can get away with whatever you're planning?"

Harry ignored the vice grips the two Slytherins had on his arms and hastened to continue Hermione's line of thinking. "Do you really think that Dumbledore doesn't know everything that happens in this school, Malfoy? If you think that you can just—"

"Just what, Potter?" Malfoy spat. "Do you think that I fear that great Muggle-loving halfwit? Times are changing. Because of you, my father is in jail. But the Malfoy family has always served the Dark Lord." Malfoy paused and stalked towards Hermione, stopping to meet her defiant gaze. "Malfoys, Miss Granger, can get away with anything."

"I'm not afraid of you," Hermione snapped. "If you think you can intimidate me, you're wrong."

Malfoy pretended not to hear her. "You know, Potter," he began calmly, studying Hermione with an intensity that further sparked Harry's anger. "For a mudblood, she isn't half bad. Of course, when she first arrived here, all bossy and bushy-haired, I doubt anyone believed that she'd be snogging the Great Harry Potter in six years time."

On cue, the Slytherins dissolved into fits of howling laughter. The ones holding on to Harry leered at him, great grins lighting up their faces. It made Harry feel sick and he watched the scene unfolding before him with growing horror, the whine of panic in his head growing louder.

"And does it bother you, Malfoy," Hermione said crisply, her voice hard and audible over the guffawing laughter. "That, me, a Muggleborn, everything you despise, is far more powerful and cleverer than you, a pureblood, can ever hope to be?"

Silence. The Slytherins were all staring at Malfoy and Hermione, their mouths hanging open. Malfoy seemed stunned and he blinked at Hermione a few times before her words sunk in. A scowl twisted

across his mouth and his eyes visibly darkened. The Slytherins drew in a breath, watching Draco expectantly.

“She’s right, you know, Malfoy,” Harry said quietly, his heart beating very fast. “For all your “pureness” you didn’t even have enough balls to take us on with our wands. Hermione’s right, you’re nothing but a weak, petulant, coward.”

Harry’s words had the desired effect. Malfoy’s attention swung from Hermione to focus on him. Eyes narrowed, Malfoy approached him, stopping until they were a foot apart.

“Weak am I, Potter?” he breathed. “Answer me something... is this weak?”

Unblinking, Malfoy swung back and plowed his fist into Harry’s stomach. For a moment, Harry was only aware of Hermione’s sudden shriek before pain reverberated through his body. If the two Slytherins hadn’t been holding him up, he would no doubt have fallen to the floor. Tears springing into his eyes, Harry sucked in a laboured breath and forced himself to meet Malfoy’s eyes.

“Call off your goons,” he gasped. “And we’ll see who’s stronger.”

Malfoy’s fist plowed into his abdomen again and Harry grit his teeth, more prepared for the blow. “C’mon, Potter,” Malfoy taunted. “Stand and take it like a man.”

This time, Malfoy swung his fist towards Harry’s jaw. Head snapping back, a wave of dizziness overtook him, his legs buckling beneath him. The underside of his face screamed aloud in pain. It was nothing like the punch Ron had lain on him after his failed date with Hermione in Hogsmeade—this one was real. Malfoy knew was he was doing and he knew exactly how to inflict as much damage as possible.

“Harry!” Hermione shrieked. “Draco, stop, you’re hurting him.... Stop... please, stop!” Hermione was practically sobbing as she struggled uselessly against the bind that Goyle had her in.

Paying her no heed, Malfoy focused on Harry again. "This is nothing, Potter," he seethed, eyes wild. "When the Dark Lord finally kills you—you'll miss this."

Malfoy used his knee this time, bringing it up into Harry's midsection with a sickening crunch. Harry gasped for air, his ears and head ringing. Coughing wildly, he tried to gather himself together before Malfoy continued his beating.

Malfoy paused momentarily, eyes traveling to where Hermione was yelling herself hoarse and pulling uselessly against Goyle's death-grip. "Shut her up, will you?" Malfoy said irritably. "Goyle, you know we can't have anyone finding them until we're finished here."

Goyle nodded and clamped a hand over Hermione's mouth. Satisfied with that, Malfoy turned back to Harry. He looked down at his fist, a small smile curling across his face. "You seem to be bleeding on me, Potter. Now... where were we?"

Body shaking, Harry tried to hold his head high. "You'll never win, Malfoy," he croaked out. "The only way you can get the upper hand is to tie me up... hardly says much about you..."

Malfoy's eyes were flat at his fist connected with Harry's ribcage. Harry closed his eyes, hearing something inside him crunch.

"C'mon, Potter..." Malfoy said cruelly. "I don't mind if you beg..."

"Got to hell," Harry managed to rasp out.

"I was hoping that you'd—"

"ARGH!"

Malfoy spun around, a look of complete shock on his face. Goyle was jumping up and down, waving his hand as little droplets of blood flew all over the place.

"That bitch!" he yelled, waving his hand. "She bit me!"

“What?” Malfoy hollered, looking furious. “You let her go?”

Goyle, suddenly realizing the error of his ways, stopped waving his hand with a look of horror on his face. “Oh... yeah...” he said sheepishly. “Oops.”

“You stupid, brainless moron!” Malfoy shouted. “Where did she go?”

Harry tried glancing around, his heart sinking when he spotted Crabbe and another Slytherin dragging Hermione back down the hall towards them. Her cheeks were tear stained, her chest heaving as Crabbe roughly shoved her towards Malfoy. Harry struggled uselessly against his captors, everything in him filled with a fierce determination to try and help her.

“Good,” Malfoy said approvingly. “At least one of you has got some brains.”

Crabbe smiled eagerly. “Thought you wouldn’t appreciate Potter’s girlfriend running off.”

“You’re sick, Malfoy,” Hermione said, voice breaking. “You’re truly horrid.”

“I’d tell you to bite me, but...” Malfoy trailed off and took a step closer to her. “Do you have any comprehension of what I’m going to do to you?”

Hermione was trembling again. “Please, let us go, Malfoy... you’ve proved your point...”

“I haven’t proved anything,” Malfoy said, leaning forward until Hermione shrunk back against Crabbe. “And you should know, I’m only going to hurt you so I can hurt him...”

“Malfoy, I swear to you, if you so much as touch her, you will pay,” Harry croaked out, trying again to struggle free. The panic in his head was overshadowing any pain he was in, but the Slytherins didn’t so much as bother tightening their grip. Harry could only watch, helplessly, as Malfoy stepped closer to Hermione.

As if in slow motion, Malfoy reached out to trace his fingers across Hermione's cheek. Hermione stayed perfectly still, tears in her eyes, but didn't make any other moves to defend herself. Harry met her eyes, surprised by the fierce determination he saw in them. 'She's doing this to protect me,' Harry suddenly realized. 'She's going without a fight because of... me...'

"Can't say Harry didn't warn you, Malfoy."

Malfoy and his goons whipped around as Harry felt hope blossom in his chest. He turned his head, amazement slamming into him at the sight of Ron, flanked by most members of the DA. They all had their wands out and were slowly moving toward Malfoy and his Slytherin goons.

Luna, Neville, and Ginny were at the front of the pack with Ron, but Harry could also see Dean and Seamus, as well as the Creevey brothers and several members from other houses, including Cho Chang.

Malfoy looked dangerously close to being sick. "Weasley," he said, backing up a step. "This... is a surprise..."

Ron's eyes were flat as he continued to approach Malfoy, the rest of the DA members with him. "You made a mistake, Malfoy. You should always make sure you have the entire trio accounted for before pulling some ill-conceived revenge attempt, you git."

For several tense moments, Ron and Malfoy faced off, the two of them staring eye-to-eye. Finally, Malfoy flinched and gestured to his goons. "Let's get out of here," he said, practically choking on the words.

"Give us our wands back, Malfoy," Harry said, trying to make himself sound firm but failing miserable at it.

Ron merely raised an eyebrow. "Taking their wands, Malfoy?" he asked, waving his own wand threateningly. "You bloody coward."

Malfoy scowled widely, but removed Harry and Hermione's wands from his pocket and dumped them unceremoniously on the floor. "This is far from over, Weasley."

Without another word, Malfoy turned and ran. After a few seconds, the goons followed suit. Against his valiant efforts to the contrary, Harry's knees buckled and he slid toward the floor. He pulled his knees to his chest and leaned back against the wall, the pain from Malfoy's beating beginning to hit him as adrenaline left his system.

"Harry!" Hermione and Ron cried together, rushing for him.

"Oh my god," Hermione said in a horrified voice, sinking down next to him. "Harry... are you... Oh, I'm going to kill him...." She trailed off, looking at Ron pleadingly.

"I'm fine," Harry managed, leaning his head back against the wall and coughing a few times. "Don't worry..."

"I'm sorry, mate," Ron said in a regretful voice. "Got here as soon as I could..."

A few tears trickled down Hermione's face. "Ron, we need to get him to the hospital wing."

Ron nodded soberly. "Yeah, okay... think you can walk, Harry?"

"Of course he can't walk, Ron!" Hermione shrieked, sounding hysterical. "Look at him! You never use your head, do you?"

"S-sorry..." Ron said, taken aback.

"Hermione..." Harry said weakly, reaching out for her. "It's..."

"Don't talk!" she said sharply. "It's going to be fine, you are fine."

Harry nodded weakly, too dizzy to do much else. Ron stood and pocketed his wand, turning back to the worried DA members. "We need to get Harry to the hospital wing, but they're going to be okay."

There was an instant flurry of talk and movement after Ron's pronouncement, but Harry found that he couldn't concentrate on any of it. With Ron holding him up on one side and Dean on the other, they slowly made their way to the hospital wing, flanked protectively by members of the DA.

Madam Pomfrey was horrified as soon as she got a look at him and he had no more than lain down when she was hovering over him. "Honestly, Mr. Potter, with the frequency I see you in here, I dare say you should be the one paying my salary..."

Harry merely grunted in response and closed his eyes, letting Madam Pomfrey hover over him. She waved her wand over his midsection and Harry felt warmth spread over the dull ache of pain. She repeated the motion over his aching jaw. Feeling better, Harry opened his eyes and struggled to sit up.

"Am I...?"

"Certainly not," Madam Pomfrey said scathingly. "You have several broken ribs, internal bleeding, not to mention the bruising you're going to suffer through later on... I've barely even started on you, Potter, so don't even attempt to go running off..."

Harry became aware that there was a loud scuffle going on just outside the hospital wing. He began to hear bits and pieces of voices and he was startled to realize that they were discussing that what just happened in his confrontation with Malfoy.

"It's preposterous to think that any member of this school would behave in the way these children are describing Mr. Malfoy of behaving..."

"I'm telling you, that's what we saw! Malfoy was all set to kill them, I reckon! If we hadn't gotten there in time..."

"Professor, Ron's right, we all saw what was going on... he had taken their wands from them..."

“Headmaster, I’m merely suggesting that it might be wise to get Mr. Malfoy’s side of the story... after all, Potter does have a history of finding himself in these unfortunate accidents...”

“This wasn’t an accident! He planned this! He stole their wands!”

“As you know, Headmaster, Weasley and Malfoy have a long history of mistrust, I would not put it past him to fabricate something of this nature...”

“FABRICATE???”

“And did Mr. Weasley beat up Mr. Potter himself, then, Severus?”

“Hardly, Minerva, I’m merely suggesting that it was dark and that Weasley here is jumping to conclusions...”

“Conclusions...”

“There are no conclusions...”

“It was Malfoy, Sir...”

“We all saw it...”

“If Ron hadn’t gathered us all together...”

“Harry looked near unconsciousness...”

“Crabbe and Goyle were there, too...”

“Thank you, everyone, that will be all.” There was a long moment of silence and Harry felt a sudden comfort at the sound of Dumbledore’s calm tones. “Now, if you please, Miss Granger, did Mr. Malfoy lead an unprovoked attack on you and Harry earlier this evening?”

There was a silence that hung in the air before Hermione’s simple, hoarse reply. “Yes.”

Madam Pomfrey, who had stopped fussing over Harry in order to listen to what was happening outside the hospital wing, suddenly cleared her throat and turned her attention back to her patient. Harry stared at the doors, surprised when they opened and everyone came pouring in.

Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Snape led the pack, followed closely by Ron, Hermione and the rest of the DA. Ron had an arm around Hermione's shoulders, who was pale and trembling slightly. The three adults stopped dead in their tracks when they caught sight of Harry's physical condition. Madam Pomfrey stood protectively in front of Harry, radiating fury.

"If you please," she snapped. "This is a hospital wing, it is hardly procedure to have this many people bursting in on my patient. Mr. Potter here needs urgent attention."

Dumbledore's eyes softened immediately. "You are quite right, Poppy," he said gently. "We did not mean to intrude."

"No," Harry said firmly, sitting up and throwing his legs over the side of the bed. He faced them all, a determined look on his face. "I need to know... Malfoy, what's going to..." Harry stopped, a sudden thought occurring to him. "Something is going to happen to him, right?"

"Of course, Potter," McGonagall said, her eyes flat. "Malfoy committed a serious offense tonight."

"He'll be gone." Everyone turned to Hermione, who had spoken up, a trembling note to her voice. She seemed surprised that she had spoken aloud. "I just mean..." she continued weakly. "He'll know what's going to happen to him. He said that... he said that V-Voldemort would protect him..."

Everyone but Dumbledore and Harry flinched at Voldemort's name. Hermione seemed to lose the rest of her energy and she clung to Ron, wavering slightly on her feet. Madam Pomfrey picked up on it right away and her eyes flashed indignantly.

"Well," she said irritably. "That enough! I will not tolerate anymore harassment of my patients tonight. Granger, kindly settle yourself down, you'll be spending the rest of the night in the hospital as well."

"Thank you, Poppy," Dumbledore said, smiling a little. His eyes swept over Harry for a moment. "I'd like a short talk with Harry first, if it's not too much trouble."

Madam Pomfrey struggled with herself. "His injuries..."

"Require immediate care, I know," Dumbledore said, still smiling indulgently. "It won't be long, I promise."

Everyone else left. Ron gently steered Hermione to one of the beds and looked hesitant to leave. After several pointed throat-clearings from Madam Pomfrey, he went, promising to be back first thing in the morning. While Madam Pomfrey went to care for Hermione, Dumbledore sat down on the edge of Harry's bed, eyes deeply troubled. Harry looked away from him, his body beginning to ache again.

"Harry, I believe I owe you an apology," he said softly. "What Mr. Malfoy did tonight... well, I must admit, I always knew it was somewhat of a possibility. I knew his dislike of you bordered on an all-consuming hatred, only intensifying last year when you managed to evade Voldemort again and his father was imprisoned. I had hoped that there was still time to change him, that Hogwarts could still offer him a chance to build his own future." Dumbledore let out a deep sigh. "For turning a deaf eye to the obvious warning signals, I am sorry. What happened tonight should never have occurred."

Harry looked away, eyes settling on Hermione. She finished drinking a potion Madam Pomfrey had given her and dropped off into sleep after mere seconds. Harry felt a sudden chill watching her. If Ron hadn't shown up... if Malfoy still had them cornered down in that hall.... He rubbed his arms, remembering his complete inability to do anything, his powerlessness without his wand...

He rubbed his eyes, feeling exhausted. "I don't care about what Malfoy did to me," he finally said. "He almost... I think he would've to

Hermione..." Harry trailed off, unable to voice the words aloud. "Just to hurt me."

"As will be the same danger in the future, Harry." Dumbledore peered at him shrewdly. "Because the three of you together are powerful—much more so than alone. Voldemort would love nothing more than to destroy the bond you have with Ron and Hermione, especially with Hermione. And you must not let him."

Harry nodded numbly and Dumbledore stood. "Get some rest, Harry."

As soon as he was gone, Madam Pomfrey went back to hovering over Harry. "Here," she said, thrusting several vials of liquid at him. "Drink up."

Harry did, though they tasted terrible. She must have given him the same potion she had given Hermione because his eyes growing heavily. Grateful, he surrendered himself to rest.

When he woke up in the middle of the night, Harry lay disoriented for a moment, only aware of a dull ache in his jaw and abdomen. Blinking sleepily into the darkness, it took a moment before the images of the confrontation with Malfoy flashed through his mind. Quickly he identified what had awoken him, as the sounds of quiet sobbing permeated the otherwise quiet stillness of the hospital wing.

"Hermione?" he said softly into the darkness.

At the sound of his voice, the sobs quieted and Harry struggled to sit up. "Hermione?" he asked again. "I can't see anything... where are you?"

For one terrible minute, Harry was afraid she wouldn't answer him. Relief flooded through him at the sound of her voice. "I'm fine," she whispered hoarsely. "Go back to sleep."

Harry threw back his covers and padded over in the direction of her voice. "Hermione," he said gently. "I'm coming... just hold on a minute..."

"No," she choked out. "You need rest... I'm fine... I'm just being silly... Oh, Harry, don't..."

Finding her, Harry sunk down on the edge of her bed. "I'm fine, Hermione," he said softly. "Just, please, let me..."

"Harry..." she said again, his name coming out as barely more than a whisper. "I'm so sorry..."

Blindly, they reached out for each other. And then she was in his arms and he was holding her tightly against him and she was clinging to him with a trembling force. Harry winced in slight pain, but didn't move, his need to hold her outweighing any discomfort he might be feeling.

"I'm so sorry," she sobbed again, clutching him tightly.

"Shhh..." he said, rocking her. "It doesn't matter... there's nothing you could have done..."

She let out a sob. "I know..." she said hoarsely. "Malfoy was hurting you and I couldn't do anything, Harry. I couldn't... I could only watch... and I couldn't... I couldn't... help you..."

"Hermione..." he whispered, dully realizing that she was in shock. "It's okay, it doesn't matter..."

"But it does!" she burst out. "I've never felt more helpless in my life!"

"I know," Harry said. "When I thought that Malfoy might..." he stopped suddenly, the scene re-playing itself in his mind. "When I knew there was nothing I could do to help you... I've never been more terrified of anything in my life, Hermione."

"I hate him," Hermione said quietly. "I never did before, you know, not like you and Ron did. But I... I hate him now. I hate him for hurting you. And I hate him for making me watch."

"Hermione..."

"I can't help it," she said, cutting him off. "I know they'll never find him now. But one day, he's right, one day we'll see him again. And I'm going to..." Hermione trailed off, her voice dropping. "One day, he'll pay."

The steely determination in her voice chilled Harry and he hugged her closer, realizing that Malfoy had stolen whatever had been left of Hermione's innocence. Again, he couldn't help but wonder, if Ron hadn't shown up when he had...

Hermione seemed to read his mind. "I can still feel it," she said hoarsely. "Where he touched me... it won't go away..."

Hot anger flooded Harry's body and his hands shook. In that moment, he understood Hermione's desire for revenge perfectly. He had surrounded them in the middle of the night, stolen their wands, Malfoy had outnumbered them, out powered them, all done in an attempt to hurt him.

Sensing his anger, Hermione shifted and gently let her hand trail across his stomach. "He can't touch us now," she whispered fiercely. "We didn't let him win, Harry. He can't hurt us now. Never again... he can't touch us..."

"Hermione..." he croaked her name, reaching out for her again. He pushed his anger away as they clung to each other, shivering together as the memories of the night flashed through their minds. Then someone moved and Harry wasn't sure who it was, or maybe it was both of them at the same time, because they were kissing and their teeth were bumping painfully together because they couldn't see anything at all.

Her arms were wound tight around the back of his neck and when they broke away, Hermione pressed her face to his shoulder, her arms tightening around his neck. Harry barely noticed, and he gently stroked her hair, his previous high-emotion giving away to numb shock.

Ironically, the only thing he could think to say was, "Us and hospital wings, Hermione. Don't know what it is about all this sickness that has us snogging like we were in the Astronomy Tower."

Hermione turned her head and Harry could feel the hot puff of her breath on his neck. He knew she was smiling, though he could not see her. "See?" she whispered, one of her hands uncurling from the back of his neck so she could lightly trace over his jaw. "Malfoy can't even begin to take away what we have..."

"We're stronger together," Harry said abruptly, Dumbledore's earlier words floating into his mind. "Err... I mean, you and me and Ron. When we're together."

Hermione let out a delighted little laugh. "Oh, Harry, you are rather helpless, aren't you?"

"I... hey, what d'you mean by that?"

“Oh, nothing...” she said vaguely, her fingers continuing to dance across his face. “Harry... do you know... we’re going to fall helplessly behind the study schedule I set up for exams...”

Harry frowned. “Hermione... exams... don't you think that—”

Harry was interrupted by the sound of a loud throat clearing. Harry and Hermione quickly broke apart, squinting into the total darkness of the hospital wing. They both jumped at the sound of Madam Pomfrey’s steely voice. “I will not tolerate any canoodling in my hospital wing... the two of you need rest! This is hardly the place for displays of teenage hormones! Back to your bed, Potter, and if I catch you out of it one more time, I will chain you to it, mark my words.”

Face burning red in embarrassment, Harry quickly slid off Hermione’s bed and blindly groped his way towards his own. He could feel Madam Pomfrey’s eyes on the back of his head as he settled under the covers.

--

Harry sensed that he did not want to open his eyes. He could hear commotion—lots of it. There were voices, all chatting away at once, loud and grating, exacerbating a splitting headache gathering behind his eyes.

Mentally, Harry took a quick inventory of his injuries, pleasantly relieved to find that he was no longer in any more physical discomfort. Whatever Madam Pomfrey had given him had certainly done the trick.

He was able to sit up and find his glasses without anyone noticing his presence. A quick look at Hermione’s bed only showed her rumpled sheets—she was nowhere in sight. Harry turned back to the gaggle of voices, somewhat taken aback to find Ron and the members of the DA in a heated discussion amongst themselves. After listening for a few moments, Harry realized that they were talking about Malfoy’s apparent disappearance.

“Should have stunned him,” Ron was saying with a scowl. “Too worried about Harry, though... didn’t want to give the other Slytherins a reason to hurt him.”

“We had him cornered, though,” Dean said, punching one fist into the other hand. “He was completely outnumbered.”

“Malfoy’s unpredictable,” Ginny spoke up. “It was probably safest to just save Harry and Hermione and let Dumbledore deal with Malfoy.”

“Didn’t seem to do the trick, though, did it, Gin?” Ron said with disgust. “Malfoy’s gone.”

“And Hermione and I are okay,” Harry said softly, causing all the DA members to jump and stare at him guiltily.

“Bloody hell, Harry!” Ron cried, putting a hand over his heart. “Don’t do that!”

“Some good DA members we are,” Seamus muttered. “We don’t even notice when our protectorate wakes up...”

Harry blinked sleepily. “Protectorate?”

Ron had the decency to look embarrassed. “Well—err... Dumbledore was worried, you know....” Ron looked pleadingly around for help, but the rest of the DA members seemed very intent on studying the floor. “No one knows where Malfoy got to, Harry. Dumbledore just thought it’d be a wise idea if we kept an eye on you while everyone was at breakfast.”

Harry was too drained to get properly worked up about it. “Good idea,” he said, causing Ron’s eyes to furrow in confusion. “Where’s Hermione?”

“Toilet,” Ron said helpfully. “Don’t worry, not alone. Sent a bunch of DA members with her.”

Harry stared at him, suspecting that Hermione was far from overjoyed with that idea. He threw his covers off and got to his feet while the

others watched him with curiosity. Making a move towards the door, he was momentarily stunned when everyone moved to block his path. Scowling, Harry folded his arms over his chest.

“What’s going on here?”

“Safety precautions,” Ron filled in helpfully. “We’ll walk you wherever you need to go—”

“Ron, I don’t need a bodyguard!”

Ron’s face was beginning to redden. “Well—I dunno, Harry. You and Hermione were certainly caught off guard last night...” Seeing the look on Harry’s face, Ron rushed to explain. “I mean, I’m sure you had much more, err... important things on your mind...”

“It’s okay, Harry,” Dean filled in helpfully. “We have permission from Dumbledore, you know.”

Harry made another move forward, his scowl widening when his steps were closely followed by members of the DA. “Okay,” he said loudly. “I appreciate what you guys did for me last night and all, but I really don’t want—”

“—Honestly, if you people don’t stop following me around this very instant I’m going to... to... well, it’s absolutely ridiculous at any rate! The mere notion that I need some kind of... of a... following... I’m perfectly capable of using the toilets on my own, thank you!”

Harry smiled a little in relief when Hermione came bursting into the hospital wing, looking no happier with the situation than he was. On her heels, she was being followed closely by Luna, Seamus, Neville, and Harry realized, with no small surprise, Cho.

“The loos are very dangerous, you know,” Luna said mildly. “We had to make sure that Malfoy hadn’t lain a trap... never know what’s in there...”

“Yes, but was it really necessary for Seamus to burst in on me when I was trying to relieve myself?”

Harry's jaw dropped and he fixed Seamus with an accusatory glare. To his credit, Seamus backed up a few paces, looking more than a little nervous. "For her protection, you know, Harry..." he said weakly.

Harry caught Hermione's eye and they shared a bit of a grin. "I, uh, think we can manage from here," Harry said carefully. "Not that we're not thankful for what you did yesterday."

"Because we are," Hermione continued, looking around her pleadingly. "It's just that..."

"We get the hint," Ginny said, grinning. "C'mon guys, they want to be left alone."

Harry had a moment of surprise when the rest of the DA all turned to Ron, apparently seeking his permission. Ron scowled deeply, looking less than happy with the situation. "Fine," he snapped. "Go on, then."

With much flourish, the DA hurriedly departed, looking more than a little relieved. Feeling like his day could not get any stranger, Harry was stunned when Cho awkwardly approached him.

Harry, realizing he was staring with his mouth partially agape, quickly rushed to say something. "Err... hello, Cho," he managed. "How're you?"

Absentmindedly, she brushed a long lock of hair out of her eyes. "Oh... I'm fine; I guess..." she cleared her throat, shifting uncomfortably. "So... are you... alright?"

"Yeah," Harry said feeling more uncomfortable and wishing that she would leave. "Look, it was really decent of you to come to our, err... rescue yesterday. So... thanks."

She smiled shyly. "Oh, well, you would have done the same for any of us in a second."

"Right," Harry said smiling weakly and wondering what Cho wanted. "So, err... are you... how are you?"

"You already asked me that," Cho said, leaning a little closer to him. "I'm doing well. I've been seeing Terry Boot now for a while. He's a nice fellow."

"I thought..." Harry trailed off and cleared his throat. "I heard that you were seeing Michael Coroner."

"Oh, that..." Cho said, forcing a laugh. "No, that's finished, he turned out to be a git. Didn't realize you were keeping track, though."

"I wasn't," Harry said defensively. "Hermione told me."

Cho frowned and there was a long stretch of silence. Harry glanced at his feet, feeling decidedly more awkward and not understanding why Cho wouldn't just leave.

Harry felt weak with relief when Hermione appeared next to him, a bright smile on her face. "Cho," she greeted pleasantly. "Thanks so much for what you did yesterday, I know it couldn't have been easy."

"Oh, well..." she said, backing up a step. "I was just telling Harry that it wasn't anything he would ever do for any of us."

"Mmhmm," Hermione said easily. "Well, it was nice seeing you again. Have a good morning!"

Then, taking Harry by the arm, Hermione led him away. Harry craned his neck over his shoulder in time to see Cho glare at their backs before turning on her heel and stomping away. "Thanks," Harry said quietly. "I dunno what she wanted."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "What do you think she wanted, Harry?"

Harry blinked slowly. "But—Hermione..." he stuttered. "That was ages ago! Besides, she's seeing someone else now... Terry Boot, I think..."

"Oh, I doubt she still fancies you," Hermione said airily. "She just doesn't like losing. You've moved on, therefore, she must show you how she's moved on. It's really quite simple."

“Simple?” Harry repeated, incredulous.

“And you moved onto me, no less,” Hermione continued helpfully. “Which, actually, further proves her suspicions while the two of you were dating, thus giving her free reign to dislike you...”

“Dating?” Harry echoed again. “We were hardly... we went to Hogsmeade once! We kissed once! That hardly qualifies as dating.”

“To you, maybe.”

Harry frowned. “Does this mean that we’ve never dated?”

“Technically, I suppose,” Hermione replied after thinking it over for a moment. “But we don’t need to date. We have a mature relationship based upon mutual love, trust, and understanding. I hardly think we need to date.”

“You don’t want to date me?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Really, Harry... that’s hardly what I said. Besides, it’s not like you’ve ever asked me out on a date before.” Hermione gave a pained sigh. “But now’s not really the time. We really need to talk to Ron.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed weakly, eyes falling on his best friend who had sat down on the edge of Harry’s hospital bed and was staring off into space, the same scowl on his face.

Harry and Hermione approached him in slight trepidation. Ron pretended not to notice.

“Ron...” Harry said, trying to keep his voice level. “What’s... err... something bothering you, mate?”

Slowly Ron lifted his head. “No,” he said moodily.

Hermione sighed again and sat down next to him. "It's okay, Ron," she said softly. "There wasn't—you did the best you could. What happened wasn't your fault."

Harry blinked, the cause of Ron's strange behaviour sinking in. He was guilty. He was guilty for not being there when Malfoy had cornered them. With small horror, Harry realized he'd feel much the same way if Malfoy ever threatened Ron and Hermione while he was off somewhere else.

"Ron," he said quietly. "Hermione's right. Malfoy probably planned it that way. He knew if he cornered the three of us, he'd never get away with it."

"That's just it," Ron muttered. "I should've been there."

"You were," Hermione said firmly. "When it mattered most, you were. Don't you see that, Ron? There was nothing Harry and I could do. If it hadn't been for you, well..."

"Yeah, and Harry was beaten near unconscious by the time I got there," Ron snapped. "Some help I was."

"C'mon, Ron," Harry said, beginning to lose patience. "We're telling you, you were loads of help, okay?"

Ron didn't look convinced, but he nodded anyway, clearly wanting to let the subject drop. Hermione chewed on her bottom lip, looking eager to ask him something. "Ron?" she asked breathlessly, looking as though she was mad with curiosity. "Can I ask... how did you know what happened? And how did you get the old DA together so quickly?"

"Oh—that..." Ron said, blushing a little in embarrassment. "Well, I saw it. Me and Seamus and Dean stayed out a little later than we meant to. I still had Harry's map, so when we checked to make sure there were no professors nearby, we saw the pair of you surrounded by Malfoy and his goons. Didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what was happening. I knew I'd never be able to take Malfoy on by myself." Ron stopped and, looking a little sheepish, withdrew a coin

from his pocket. Hermione gaped at it, recognition lighting up in her eyes. "Couldn't quite remember the spell you used on these things last year to call us all together, so I made up my own version."

Hermione's eyes nearly popped out of her head. "You...?" she managed to squeak out. "Did a spell to call together the DA?"

"Well," Ron said defensively. "I had to do something, didn't I? Besides, I'm not completely useless, you know." Ron's eyes turned to the ground. "I wasn't about to let Malfoy beat the stuffing out of Harry."

There was a long moment of silence while Ron studied the floor and Harry studied the ceiling. Hermione cleared her throat. "Well—" she finally said, standing up nervously. "I just remembered... I left my Transfiguration book in the lavatories... be right back..."

"Be careful," Harry mumbled. "Malfoy's still unaccounted for."

Hermione nodded and hurried off. Without her presence, the tension in the room was palpable. Harry glanced at Ron, surprised when their eyes met.

"Well..." Ron mumbled. "That was... a right stupid situation for you and Hermione to get yourselves into..."

"Yeah," Harry said weakly.

There was a long beat of silence, broken only by several loud throat clearings by Ron.

Harry summoned up his courage, knowing he had to say something, even if he wasn't quite sure what that was. "Ron, look the thing is..." he began at the same time that Ron said, "Harry, I just want you to know..."

They both stopped and looked at each other, smiling apologetically. "You know what?" Harry said, shrugging. "Forget it. It doesn't matter."

"Harry, maybe we should..."

“Forget it,” Harry said. “Everything’s fine, okay?”

Ron studied him for a moment. “Yeah, okay,” he said. There was another moment of awkward silence before Ron grinned. “You know, you should have seen Trewlaney this morning. ‘I knew horrid trouble would befall this boy—AGAIN—exams create such tension... saw it in my crystal ball thingie...’”

Harry snickered. “Yeah? Did she really?”

“Yeah,” Ron said happily. “Then McGonagall got all offended by it. ‘Honestly, Sybill, no need bringing exams up to try and scare the students, they’re already nervous enough as it is...’”

“Bet you Snape was awfully delighted by the whole thing.”

“Oh, well, he still claims that Malfoy’s innocent.” Ron scowled deeply. “Everyone knows he did it, Harry. Don’t know what Snape’s trying to prove.”

“We got off easy,” Harry said. “Maybe if Malfoy had killed me or something, Snape would change his mind.”

“Yeah, or maybe he’s just a git,” Ron said.

Hermione came back into the hospital wing, several large books in her arms. Harry and Ron exchanged a look and resisted the urge to burst into laughter.

“Honestly!” she huffed, seeing the look on their faces. “Exams are only—”

“—days away,” Ron finished, with a grimace. “Yeah, about that... I gotta go...”

Hermione's eyes settled on Ron, narrowing into a frightening glare. “Go where?”

"Well, the thing is," Ron said, grinning. "Since we're not going out, you don't have any power over me. Have fun, Harry. I'll catch you two later."

With that, Ron bolted, leaving Hermione seething.

"And just what do you think you're smirking at?" she demanded, catching the look on Harry's face.

"Err... nothing," Harry said, trying to hide his grin. "Nothing."

"Mr. Potter, if I could have a word once you've finished your examination, please."

Harry started, glancing up from his Transfiguration's exam. Professor McGonagall was staring fixedly at her desk, making Harry wonder whether or not he had really heard her speak. Everywhere around him students were beginning to twitch as the clock slowly round down. Five minutes left of their final examinations. Nearly everyone had given up any pretense of completing their written exam and were staring open-mouthed at the clock, eagerly tracking the time with their eyes.

In front of him, a quill was barely recognizable as it flew across Hermione's parchment. She paid no head to the winding down of the clock in her desperation to fit in as much as she possibly could.

Harry concentrated on his own exam, intent on completing it as best as he possibly could. He was surprised by the relative ease in which he was able to take most of his final exams. Benefits, he decided, of being the boyfriend of the smartest witch in school.

That thought firmly in his mind, Harry set down his quill, realizing that completing his test was a futile measure. To everyone else, the end of exams meant freedom. To him, it meant something that he had been doing his best not to think about.

Like every summer, he had to go back to the Dursley's. Even though he was going to be of legal age in a couple of months, Dumbledore had made it clear that the safest place for Harry was the Dursley's residence. In previous years, the thought of such a long separation from Ron and Hermione had been terrible. Now it was unbearable.

"Alright."

The class immediately snapped to attention, eyes riveted to McGonagall. She was standing behind her desk, an amused expression on her face. Hermione let out an unintelligible squeak and started writing faster.

"Your examinations are over. Please leave your exam on my desk as you leave." There was an instant flurry of movement as students fought each other to get to the front of the classroom. "And have a good summer," McGonagall said as students piled out the door.

Hermione finally finished scribbling and she stood slowly, walking with Harry to the front of the room. "Well..." she said breathlessly. "That went well. Do you think that went well? I'm not sure if I wrote nearly enough for question 15, but that was only because 13 required in-depth explanation. How did you do, Harry? I know we reviewed everything on there, but number 8 didn't give you too much trouble, did it? I know you've struggled a little in—"

"Breathe, Hermione," he said, smiling. "I'm sure I—"

"Did an excellent job," McGonagall interrupted coolly. "If your other exams are any indication."

Both Harry and Hermione stared. "I'm sorry?" Harry managed, still gaping.

The corners of McGonagall's mouth curved slightly. "Your exams, Potter, have been, quite frankly, outstanding this year. I daresay, if it wasn't for Divination, you'd have the second highest score in your year."

"I, uh..." Harry trailed off, blushing profusely. "Thank you, Professor."

"You're welcome, Potter," she said crisply. She nodded her head in the direction of the door. "Have a good summer."

Hermione couldn't contain herself. "Who has the highest score, Professor?" she blurted out, practically bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"That, Miss Granger," McGonagall said. "Should be quite obvious."

Hermione opened her mouth to continue her line of thought, but Harry took her hand and tugged her out of the room. "Goodbye, Professor," he called over his shoulder.

They no sooner left the room when Ron bounded up to them. "Exams are over, exams are over," he sang in a horribly nasally voice. "No more school, no more books, no more teacher's dirty looks—"

"Honestly, Ron!"

"No more school, no more books, no more—"

"Ron!"

"—teachers' dirty—"

"Set an example, will you?"

"—looks."

"Well, then," Harry said brightly, effectively cutting off what looked to be a long drawn-out fight. "Let's see what's for lunch?"

Ron nodded appreciatively. "I've always liked the way you thought, Harry."

"Ooh," Hermione said, suddenly looking cheery. "Let's go for a picnic!"

The boys shared uncertain looks. "A... picnic?" Ron said, looking as though a picnic was the last thing he wanted to have.

Hermione started walking briskly, excitement in her voice. "I'm sure that Dobby would be more than willing to pack us some food. And it's such a nice day out, isn't it? Seems only fair that we do something to mark the end of our sixth-year."

"Yeah..." Ron said as he and Harry hurried to catch up with her. "But a picnic? Isn't that... I dunno, kind of girly?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "It certainly is not."

Ron looked at Harry pleadingly. "It's just that... as far as celebrations go... what d'you think, Harry?"

Harry glanced at Hermione's face, which was looking hopefully at him. "I think a picnic sounds great," he lied.

Hermione beamed. "Oh, we should go all out, don't you think? I can transfigure a blanket to sit on, but I think we should ask Dobby for several courses..."

Ron and Harry followed behind her at a much more subdued pace. Ron shot Harry an accusatory look. "Just 'cause she's your girlfriend doesn't mean you always have to take her side."

"C'mon, Ron," Harry said, a little bit of strain in his voice. The last thing he wanted to do was be present for another one of Ron's jealous fits. "Can't you just do this one little thing for her? It won't kill you."

Ron scowled. "I dunno. I might die from boredom. A... picnic!"

"A picnic!" Ron said loudly, leaning back and patting his stomach. "Was a brilliant idea."

Hermione didn't look inclined to agree. She was glaring at a trail of ants that were winding their way up towards their food basket. She shuddered. "This is so... unsanitary... spiders! In our food!"

Ron yelped. "Where?"

Harry merely grinned, enjoying himself immensely. The day was warm, but without the over-powering humidity that accompanied summer. Everywhere students were joyfully running through Hogwarts' grounds, celebrating the end to exams. Though he would soon be taking the Hogwarts' Express back to the Little Whinging, the Dursleys could not have seemed further away.

Hermione zapped at a few of the ants with her wand, frowning deeply when nothing occurred. Ron glared at her accusingly. "Hermione," he said, sounding disappointed. "What about those poor ant rights? You could be destroying entire families, you know. Anymore of this and I'm going to have to create SPAW."

Hermione didn't even look up. "Spider," she said calmly. "Crawling on your leg."

Ron let out a hoarse yell, jumping a foot in the air and slapping ineffectively at his leg. "Did I get it?" he asked Harry frantically. "Where is it? Did I get it? Is it still there?"

Hermione was valiantly trying to cover up a smirk. "Other leg, Ron."

Ron started hitting his other leg and Harry shot Hermione an accusatory look.

"Hermione," he said quietly. "There aren't any spiders anywhere near Ron."

Hermione shrugged delicately. "He was poking fun at S.P.E.W."

Harry nodded, silently resolving to never make fun of S.P.E.W. in front of Hermione again.

When Ron was satisfied he'd killed the spider, he eagerly started rummaging through the picnic basket again. "Anymore apple pie left?"

"Ron, you've already had three helpings of pie," Hermione said shortly. "Honestly, it's a wonder you're not four hundred pounds."

"I'm lucky," Ron said, proudly coming up with another slice of pie. "Weasley metabolism."

"Uh huh," Hermione said, sounding unconvinced.

"I'm sorry," Ron said, between mouthfuls. He swallowed deeply. "Did you want some?"

Hermione looked disgusted. "No thanks," she said weakly. "You go ahead."

"Dend ob anoter 'ear," Ron said with his mouth open.

"Ron!" Hermione snapped. "Have many times do I have to tell you, do not speak to me with your mouth open! Honestly, you don't see Harry talking while he's eating, do you?"

Ron sent Harry a murderous glare, and Harry looked guiltily away. "Course not," Ron said irritably. "No, Harry would never dare and talk while he was eating..."

"What is it you were trying to say before, Ron?" Harry asked quickly, hoping to distract him.

"Well..." he said thoughtfully. "It's just that... it's the end of another year, you know."

"We only have one more left," Hermione said quietly, as if the full implications were just beginning to hit her. "We have N.E.W.T.'s next year, you know..."

Ron put a hand on his stomach. "I feel sick."

"That's a surprise," Hermione muttered.

“Well, hey!” Harry cut in cheerfully. “I’m still alive, so that’s good, right?” Hermione and Ron both turned around to look at him, horrified. Harry steadfastly looked away. “Well,” he said defensively. “It sounded funny in my head.”

Hermione looked upset. “You shouldn’t say such things.”

Harry sighed. “I’m sorry, Hermione. Stupid thing to joke about, I know.”

Ron looked eager to change the subject. “Hey, Harry?” Ron asked. “Do you have to go back and live with the Muggles again this year?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, feeling his earlier depression sinking down upon him. Hermione sent him a sympathetic look.

“It’ll go quickly, Harry,” she said, not looking at all convinced.

Harry couldn’t quite meet her eyes when he nodded, the reality that it could be months before he saw her again caused his stomach to plummet.

“Hey, Harry...” Ron said slowly, as if just realizing something. “You’re turning seventeen this year.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well,” Ron said excitedly. “That means—”

“You’ll be legal to do magic!” Hermione finished, her eyes lighting up.

Harry glanced back and forth between them, a smile beginning on his mouth. “Yeah...” he said, finding himself somewhat cheered up by the prospect. “That’s true...”

“Oh, wow,” Ron said, rubbing his hands together. “Wish I could be there to see their faces...”

Harry found himself grinning broadly. "Yeah," he said dreamily. "Be nice, won't it?"

Hermione was making a valiant effort at trying to appear stern. "Now, Harry," she said breathlessly. "You won't do anything, well... just be careful..."

Harry merely nodded, too excited about the prospect of being able to do magic in front of the Dursleys to feel any annoyance at Hermione's nagging. "So how early to you s'pose Dumbledore's going to let me get out?"

"Dunno," Ron said, forehead creasing as he thought. "Wish you didn't have to go back there this year."

"Well, Harry..." Hermione said tentatively. "I mean, I know they're horrible people and everything, but you are safest there, right?"

"Didn't help me much when I was attacked by Dementors, Hermione," Harry responded irritably. "Did it?"

"Well—no," Hermione said after a moment. "But it's just..."

"Just what?" he snapped. "I'm going to be seventeen! I've tolerated the Dursleys for my whole life and I'm bloody well tired of it!"

Ron's head was snapping back and forth between them like he was watching a very fast-moving ping pong match.

Hermione sucked in a breath, her cheeks beginning to flush. "I know," she said firmly. "But it's the only place besides Hogwarts that you're safe from Voldemort, right?"

"Yeah," Harry said crossly. "So what?"

"So!" Hermione said, waving her arms around. "You'll be safest there! That's all that matters!"

"Yeah, and you won't be!"

There was a long beat of silence.

"I mean," Harry said, looking away from her and swallowing. "You two... you'll both be in danger... it's not fair that I'm the only one that gets protected..."

Hermione visibly deflated. "Oh," she said quietly. "I see."

They eyed each other for a moment, as Ron's head continued to snap back and forth between them.

"I can't go a whole summer without seeing you... both," Harry quickly added, catching Ron's eye and flushing.

Hermione merely nodded, looking exhausted. "Oh, I wish that I could..." she paused before saying in a small voice, "Well, I don't want to leave you either."

Ron coughed.

"You both," Hermione added on quickly. "I don't want to leave either of you."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Don't worry," he muttered. "I'm not jealous. Carry on. It's fine. Oh, no. I'm not needed. Not unless you're too busy snogging and get attacked by Draco Sodding Malfoy, because then! Oh, then! Then it's fine if I come to the rescue... then I'm important..."

"Spider," Hermione said calmly.

Ron stopped abruptly, mouth falling open. Quickly he closed it, scowling deeply. "C'mon, Hermione. I'm not that stupid. I'm not falling for that again."

"Fall for what?" Hermione said innocently.

Ron's eyes narrowed, but Harry noticed that he gave his surroundings a suspicious look. Apparently satisfied that Hermione was really having him on, Ron turned back to Harry. "So, mate," he

began seriously. "What do you think of the Canons' chances this season?"

Harry stared. "I'm sorry?"

"The Chudley Canons," Ron said slowly, rolling his eyes. "Quidditch team. You might have heard of it."

"Well—yeah," Harry said hurriedly, fighting off surprise. "I mean, of course."

"So, what d'you think?" Ron asked, leaning forward in interest. "D'you think they might have a shot this year? Don't know if you've seen their Keeper yet, he's ruddy good..."

"Caville, right?" Harry asked.

Ron nodded. "Yeah, they're saying he could carry them right to the finals."

"Dunno, Ron. Their Chasers aren't—"

Harry broke off abruptly at the sound of a loud sob. Both he and Ron slowly turned around, eyes widening at Hermione. She was staring at the ground, a fist stuffed in her mouth to keep down the noise of her tears. The two boys exchanged befuddled looks.

"Err, Hermione," Ron said. "What's gotten into you?"

Harry shot Ron a look. "Hermione," he said gently. "What's wrong? Are you... alright?"

Before either of them could say anything else, Hermione had flung her arms around both their necks and broke down in earnest. "I just..." she sobbed, continuing to cling to both of them. "Really, really love the pair of you! And you can both be so stupid!"

Without another word, Hermione gathered herself together and took off for the castle, leaving Harry and Ron staring open-mouthed after her.

“Well...” Ron finally managed. “That was...”

“Yeah...” Harry said, dazed. “D’you reckon she’s alright?”

“A little soft in the head, maybe,” Ron said, after thinking it over. “No idea what she was going on about, do you?”

Harry blinked at him for a moment. “No,” he finally lied.

Ron looked a little suspicious, but didn’t press the issue farther. “Well...” he said, gesturing to the castle. “Should we follow her?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, beginning to gather up their lunch remains. “Hey, Ron?”

Ron froze, bent down to pick up the picnic basket. “Yeah?”

“Are we...” Harry cleared his throat. “I mean to say, are things... are you...”

Ron raised his eyebrows, clearly amused. He picked up the food, clearly enjoying watching Harry shift uncomfortably. “Something you wanted to say, mate?”

“Err... I was just... I wanted to make sure that we were...” Harry paused, feeling more stupid by the moment. “That you weren’t still jealous,” he blurted, before wincing slightly.

Instead of the burst of anger that Harry had anticipated, Ron just shrugged. “Yeah, I’m a little jealous. I’m human. What d’you expect me to do about it?”

“Well...” Harry said slowly, as they made their way back up to the castle. “Have you tried not being jealous?”

“It’s not that easy,” Ron said, looking thoughtful. “I know I’m important to you and Hermione both. But that doesn’t mean... what the pair of you have... it’s stronger than what you have with me.”

“That’s not—”

“Okay, but it’s different. Things aren’t what they used to be, Harry.” Ron stared ahead for a moment. “Doesn’t mean things are bad, just different. I’m dealing with it.”

Harry nodded, surprised by Ron’s calm acceptance. “You’ve thought a lot about this.”

Ron snorted. “I’ve had a long time to think about it.” His voice quieted. “I can’t help but feel left out, or like you two aren’t leaving me behind in some way.”

Harry stared at the ground, not knowing what to say. Ron shuffled along next to him, apparently just as uncomfortable.

Finally, Ron cleared his throat. “So... those Canons...”

“Yeah...” Harry said, feeling intensely relieved. “I reckon they have a good shot this year.”

Harry threw the rest of his stuff in his suitcase without looking. Feeling miserable, he silently bade his four-poster bed good-bye before gathering up his stuff. Hedwig squawked at him in annoyance, clearly upset at being stashed back in her cage.

"Well, you know what?" he said irritably. "You should enjoy your last few moments here as best you can. We're back to the Dursley's again this summer, you know."

Hedwig's eyes bore back at him accusingly, as if to say, 'Well, why don't you enjoy your last few moments here?'

"Because I'm leaving Hermione," he told her, realizing that was the first time he'd uttered the words out loud. "And I don't know what's coming and I don't think I can say good-bye and I don't know how to tell her that!"

"Who are you talking to, Harry?"

Harry spun around. Seamus was frowning at him in unease. Harry was forcibly reminded of the beginning of fifth year when Seamus was certain he was going mad.

"I'm not talking to anyone," Harry muttered, brushing past him. "You're hearing things."

Seamus looked skeptical. "Sure, Harry," he said easily.

Harry merely nodded, hauling his suitcase down the stairs. Hedwig looked quite indignant about being bounced around. As he neared the common room, Hermione's voice floated up. She was obviously quite riled up about something and Harry sincerely hoped it wasn't something he had done.

"Quite ridiculous! Honestly, to even imagine that a sixth year would organize such a frivolous contest! It's a violation of privacy, that's what it is! I assure you, McGonagall will be hearing about this! She most certainly will not be impressed."

Harry grinned a little to himself, watching as Lavender Brown cowered under Hermione's piercing stare. Though Lavender stood a good half a foot taller than Hermione, she was shrinking against a corner as Hermione bore down on her. Dropping his suitcase and Hedwig's cage next to Ron's stuff (Hedwig gave Pig a disapproving stare), Harry went over to join Hermione.

"—permission, Lavender! Hoaxes like this require permission! It is completely incomprehensible to me why you would have attempted something like this in the first place!"

"Well..." Lavender said weakly. "I thought it would be fun."

"Fun? I'll tell you something, Ms. Brown, this contest has certainly not been—Harry! What are you doing here?"

Lavender looked faint with relief. "Harry," she greeted, looking at him pleadingly. "How are you?"

"Fine," Harry said, looking back and forth between the two girls. "What's, uh... going on?"

Hermione gave him a piercing look that clearly told him he should have already figured it out. "Remember that contest that Lavender started? For Hogwarts'—"

"Star couple?" Harry finished, with his eyebrows raised. "Yeah. I remember."

"Well!" Hermione gestured to where Lavender was currently quaking. "We were just discussing it."

Harry refrained from pointing out that Hermione had a very interesting definition of the word 'discussing.' Lavender sniffed, pulling herself up straighter. She seemed to have gained a little bit more confidence in herself. "Well, I'll have you know," she said snottily. "You and Harry did not win."

Hermione and Harry blinked at her.

“I’m sorry,” Harry finally managed. “I thought you said that... that...”

Lavender looked smug. “That you two didn’t win? Yeah, I did. You know why?”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“Because,” Lavender said slowly, looking more pleased with herself by the moment. “Ginny and Neville won. That’s why.”

“Ginny and Neville won?” Harry and Hermione both repeated in shock.

Lavender smiled prettily. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a red-head I have to be congratulating...”

Lavender flounced away, leaving Harry and Hermione staring after her in shock.

“We didn’t...” Hermione began, looking dazed. “Win... how could we not win?”

“Dunno,” Harry said, feeling just as confused himself.

“Oooh...” Hermione said, face beginning to heat up. “She did it purposely, that little two-timing—”

“Err, Hermione,” Harry cut in hesitantly. “You do remember how riled up the contest made you in the first place, right?”

Hermione had the decency to look embarrassed. “Well... yes. But, Harry, you know we should have won.”

“Alright,” he conceded. “We should have won.”

They stared at each for a moment.

“We really think a lot of ourselves,” Harry finally managed. “Didn’t really fancy being in the spotlight again, anyway.”

Hermione still looked a little put out, but didn't press the issue farther. "I was just heading down to the Great Hall for breakfast... train's leaving in an hour..."

Harry felt his stomach tighten up and found he wasn't in the least bit hungry. "You go on. I'm not really hungry."

"Well—you could come with me."

Harry shook his head, feeling misery crashing down around him. The last thing he wanted was to sit in the Great Hall as students gathered their belongings together and bid each other good-bye.

"It's fine..." he said. "You go eat... I'll be, uh... around..."

Hermione's face fell and Harry quickly turned before she could do anything else to stop him. Heart pounding, he pushed past the gaggle of girls that were clumped together ("Ooh, Ginny! Congratulations! You two are so perfect for each other!") and exited out through the portrait hole. Studying the ground, he shuffled his way out of the castle.

Outside he breathed out a tiny sigh of relief, the quiet of the grounds a welcome haven. Slowly he made his way down the hill, Hagrid's hut appearing in his line of sight. Vaguely Harry felt he should be saying good-bye to the half-giant, but the prospect of doing so only further depressed him. Dropping down, he contented himself with sitting on the ground. He picked morosely at a few blades of grass, feeling hopelessly lonely and guilty for abandoning Hermione.

"Well—if I knew you were just coming out here to pout, I probably would have stayed with Ron in the Great Hall."

Harry jumped, twisting his neck around as he did so. Hermione was glaring down at him, a plate of food in one hand and the other on her hip.

"I'm not pouting," he said crossly. "I just wanted to be alone."

Hermione looked stung. “Well—you may be perfectly alright getting rid of me, but I’m not!”

“Perfectly alright getting rid of you?” Harry repeated, vaguely realizing that his voice was rising.

Hermione bit her lip and Harry could see that she was struggling to hold back tears. “What’s going, Harry?” she said softly. “I mean, one moment you’re fine and then the next... are you that eager to get rid of me?”

“Of course not!” he snapped. “I can’t even bear the thought of—Hermione, every time I think about leaving you... it’s more than...” Harry trailed off, frustrated by his inability to put what he was feeling into words.

Hermione seemed to understand. She sunk down next to him, her plate of food balanced precariously on one knee. “I know... I mean, I thought that was what was bothering you....” She let out a long sigh, turning to look at him sadly. “It’s hardly forever, you know. It’s only for the summer.”

“Yeah,” Harry mumbled, avoiding her eyes.

“I’m going to be okay,” she said softly. “I promise.”

“Yeah,” he said again, feeling his stomach give a furious little lurch.

Hermione studied him for a long time. Carefully, she pushed her plate off to the side. “I’m not really that hungry, either,” she admitted. “But my parents always told me that breakfast was the most important meal of the day.”

Harry swallowed past the lump that was gathering in his throat. “You should eat, then.”

Hermione shrugged. “You’re not.”

“I’m hardly an example worth following,” Harry muttered.

“Oh, stop with the pity part, Harry,” Hermione admonished gently. “Do you really want me to go back inside?”

Harry shook his head. “No.”

“Okay, then,” Hermione whispered. He turned his face to study her, surprised to see the same misery he was feeling reflected in her eyes. It suddenly hit him that she was feeling much of the same things he was.

“Hermione?”

She looked up, her eyes vulnerable. “Yes?”

“I love you.”

She smiled faintly and gave a little nod. “I know.”

Harry let out a relieved breath. “It’ll be okay, right? I mean... it’ll only be a few weeks...”

“I’m scared,” Hermione blurted out before flushing. “I mean...” voice controlled, Hermione fidgeted nervously. “For you and... me, a little, I guess... but mostly for you...”

“They shouldn’t be separating us,” Harry said determinedly. “It’s stupid.”

Hermione nodded, looking far away. “Will you write me?”

“Of course I will,” Harry said, surprised that she’d even asked. “Every day.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Well—I was lucky if I so much as heard at all from you last summer.”

“That was different.”

“Yes,” Hermione agreed quietly. “It was.”

They fell into silence. At some point, Hermione closed the space separating them. Then they were kissing, a kiss full of urgency and desperation as if it could somehow push away the uncertainty of what was to come.

The Hogwarts' Express let out one long shrill whistle, announcing its approaching departure. Harry hastily climbed aboard behind Ron and Hermione, Hedwig's cage swinging dangerously in one hand and his suitcase in the other. Quickly they found an empty carriage to store their stuff.

"I suppose you two have to make your rounds now," Harry said quietly, trying to keep the accusing note out of his voice.

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look. "Yeah," Ron finally said. "Gotta see Luna first, though... make sure she got in okay..."

Once he was gone, Harry found himself unable to look at Hermione. She cleared her throat hesitantly. "It shouldn't take long, Harry."

"Yeah, okay," he muttered. "I'll be here."

"I'm really sorry," she said apologetically. "I don't want to, but... Oh..."

She leaned in to kiss him. When she pulled away, Harry couldn't help the grin that spread across his mouth. "You know," he mused. "If you had done that a couple of years ago, I don't think that being abandoned by you and Ron would have bothered me nearly as much."

Hermione smiled fondly at him before leaning up to peck his cheek. "I'll see you later."

"Yeah."

She didn't move.

"Err... Hermione...?"

“Right,” she muttered, snapping to attention. She slowly backed out of the compartment and gave him one last longing look before leaving.

Alone, Harry took a seat by the window. He stared out at the passing landscape morosely, watching as the distance between himself and Hogwarts increased. When the trolley cart came by, he managed to raise himself from his stupor to buy some food—though he wasn’t certain of what he’d purchased and had a nagging suspicion that he may have been overcharged.

Neville and Ginny came by and attempted to engage him in conversation. When he answered their questions in short, monosyllables they gave up.

“Have a good summer, Harry,” Ginny finally said, standing and bringing Neville with her.

“Thanks, Ginny,” he mumbled.

Neville smiled, sending Harry an apologetic look. “Hey, did you hear? Ginny and I won Hogwarts’ Star Couple of the Year.”

Harry attempted to smile. “That’s great, guys.”

“Yeah,” Ginny said, beaming. “Thought for sure it’d be you and Hermione.”

Neville nodded. “Me, too.”

“Nah,” Harry said, trying to sound polite. “You two deserve it.”

“Well...” Neville said uncomfortably. “See you next year.”

“Yeah,” Harry said dismissively. “See you.”

They left and Harry let out a tiny sigh of relief, going back to staring blankly out the window.

"It can make you cross-eyed, you know, when you stare out a window too long," said a disembodied voice. "Daddy told me so."

Harry slowly raised his head. "Oh... hi, Luna."

Luna smiled and sat down opposite him. "Hope you don't mind, my compartment was getting awfully crowded and Ronald told me to meet him back here."

Harry shrugged, desperate to be left alone, but not having the heart to tell Luna as much. "Sure, there's plenty of room."

Luna studied him curiously for a moment. Pulling out an old issue of The Quibbler she promptly turned it upside down and disappeared behind it without another word.

Harry felt a rush of gratitude. His eyes shifted to the compartment door, his mind willing for Hermione to return.

He didn't have to wait long. She and Ron returned silently, for once not bickering. Without saying so much as a simple greeting to Luna, Hermione went straight for him. She settled herself against him and Harry felt himself relax, his arms curling around her tiny frame. For once, he didn't care who was watching, nothing would have stopped him from holding her.

Ron was uncharacteristically silent for most of the rest of the journey. Occasionally he tried to draw Harry into conversation about Quidditch or he attempted to poke fun at S.P.E.W. When he didn't get much of a response from either of his friends he gave up and spent the rest of the trip trying to distract Luna from reading The Quibbler.

"What's a hornhumble?" he said, peaking over Luna's shoulder.

"Very endangered species, you know... Daddy believes that the Russian government has been secretly trying to eradicate them for years..."

"You don't say," Ron said, trying to sound interested. "And what's a—"

"Hornhunkle?" Luna asked vaguely. "Distant cousin, very smart creatures... more useful to wizards... that's why no one cares about the deterioration of the hornhumble..."

"Ahh..." Ron said weakly. "I see..."

Harry and Hermione spent the rest of the voyage right where they were. Ron went off to do a final prefect round, but Hermione didn't so much as budge. They didn't say much and exchanged only a few chaste kisses when they thought no one was watching. Harry didn't care, wishing that the train would never stop.

All too soon it seemed as if they had reached King's Cross Station. The train jostled to a stop and compartments doors slid open in great haste, students pouring eagerly out of the Hogwarts' Express and onto the platform. As soon as they stopped, Harry felt his heart drop and he tightened his arms around Hermione. She let out a small gasp, but didn't make any attempt to move out of his arms.

Luna calmly set down her magazine. Her large protuberant eyes slid over to them for a moment. "Let's go, Ronald," she said brightly. "Time for you to meet Daddy..."

Ron made a small, choking noise. "Excuse me? Meet..."

"My father, yes," Luna said, smiling eagerly. "It's your duty, you know, as my boyfriend."

"Duty?" Ron squeaked, shooting Harry a pleading look.

Harry, who felt a rush of gratitude towards Luna, nodded in the direction of the compartment. "Go on, Ron. Be good for you."

Ron scowled, looking betrayed, and followed Luna out of the train. Once he was gone, Hermione gave a small chuckle of laughter. "Oh, poor, Ron," she said. "You're lucky I'm not making you meet my parents."

"I've already met them," Harry said. "Sides, even if I hadn't, they don't approve of me, remember?"

Hermione sighed. "They just don't understand."

"Yeah," Harry said quietly, wishing that he could go and properly greet Hermione's parents, like any normal boyfriend would.

Hermione seemed to know exactly what he was thinking. "It doesn't matter," she whispered. "Let's not let them ruin this for us, alright?"

Harry smiled, the knots in his stomach tightening to painful levels. He nuzzled her neck below her ear. "Let's just stay here..." he whispered. "No one'll ever know..."

"Okay..." Hermione said, her voice sounding oddly strained.

The fact that Hermione had so readily agreed to do something so against the rules should have thrilled him. However, it only helped to make Harry feel worse. He slowly brushed his lips along the skin of her neck under her ear, smiling when she shivered slightly against him.

"Harry..." she said haltingly. "We have to..."

Harry pulled away. "I know."

She climbed off him and rubbed at her eyes. Harry could see that she was struggling against tears. She made as if to gather her stuff together before stopping.

"No," she said, looking around at the empty train. "Let's say goodbye here. Not out there where everyone can see."

Harry nodded. "Okay."

"Well..." Hermione said, swallowing. "Promise me you'll be careful. Do all your homework, I know you don't want to, but you must stay ahead, especially in potions. And do look out for yourself, Harry. With

everything going on... well, just don't take any unnecessary risks. I know the Dursleys are horrid, but you must—"

Harry kissed her, partly in an attempt to end her lecture. Her arms wound around his neck, holding on tightly. His hands skimmed down her back, her hips. Her tongue probed his mouth, her body pressing tightly against his own.

When they broke away, the mingled sounds of their harsh breathing filled the quiet of the compartment. Harry tenderly tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, leaning forward until his lips brushed over his forehead. He pulled away and Hermione grasped at his hands, her eyes wide.

She shook her head, as if to prevent their approaching separation. "Promise you'll be careful," she said again, a little desperate.

"I promise," he said softly.

She nodded, looking intensely worried. "It'll be fine..." she said, trying to sound reassuring. "It'll all be fine..."

"Yeah," Harry agreed in a hollow voice. "It'll go quickly."

They looked at each other and Harry knew neither of them were convinced.

"And... I..." Hermione said hesitantly. "I love you, Harry."

"I love you, too."

They stared at each other helplessly for a few moments, knowing there was nothing left to say. Hermione released him and took a step back, taking in a sharp breath of air. They gathered their stuff together, not looking at each other. Hermione left the compartment first and Harry slowly followed, glad to see that crowd had thinned out.

The Weasleys waved to him. "See you soon, Harry!" Ron called out, giving him the thumbs up sign. Harry waved back, figuring that Ron's meeting with Luna's father must have gone well.

He spotted Hermione enveloped in the arms of her parents who were openly staring at him from across the platform. He steadfastly ignored their gazes and looked around until he spotted Uncle Vernon. He was trying to hide behind a pillar, but he wasn't doing a very good job of it, his large belly noticeably stuck out.

Harry approached him slowly, feeling as though his feet were weighted down. Uncle Vernon made quite a show of looking at his watch as Harry approached. "Finally decided to come out, boy?" he sneered. "Almost left you behind."

Harry just shrugged, lacking the energy to respond to Vernon's hollow threats. He followed his uncle out of King's Cross station, waving goodbye to classmates as he went, much to Vernon's dismay.

"Now keep that bloody bird out of people's sight, boy," he said menacingly, glaring at Hedwig.

Harry shrugged again, not making any attempt at concealing Hedwig. He saw Aunt Petunia and Dudley waiting in the car, clearly unwilling to step into the train station in case they might be forced into interaction with a witch or wizard.

Harry stored his belongings in the trunk and settled himself into the backseat with Hedwig's cage on his lap.

"So," his aunt said, swiveling around to look at him as Vernon started the car. "I hope you're grateful to us for allowing you to come back this year."

Vernon snorted. "Almost didn't," he said challengingly. "Dangerous having the likes of you around."

"Oh, don't worry," Harry said, beginning to get angry. "I'm right grateful! That this is the last year I'll ever have to spend with you!"

Vernon and Petunia flinched and Hedwig hooted indignantly in her cage.

Dudley pouted. “Why’d he have to come back at all, Dad? House is so much bigger when he’s not around.”

If anything, Dudley seemed to have gained more weight since Harry had last seen him. Harry resisted the strong urge to point out that Dudley’s mere existence made the house seem smaller.

Instead he merely leaned back, letting a small smirk play around his mouth. “You know...” Harry began slowly. “It’s a good thing my girlfriend can’t hear what you lot are saying about me... it would really upset her...”

Several things happened in quick succession. Dudley made an odd choking noise and shoved his fist into his mouth. Petunia’s head snapped back around to look at him, the colour draining from her face. Vernon’s hand slipped on the wheel and the horn let out a long, shrill squeal.

“Your... did you just say you had a... What did you say, boy?” Vernon demanded angrily.

“Well, it’s just that,” Harry said innocently. “My girlfriend—she’s awfully protective. Smartest witch at Hogwarts, you know. Way more powerful than me.”

Dudley twittered nervously, eyes widening in fear. “You,” he said in slow disbelief. “Have a girlfriend?”

Harry nodded, enjoying the horrified looks on his aunt and uncle’s face. “Yeah... she’s quite dangerous, really... once put a full body-bind on a kid when we were only in our first year... he was in her way, you know...”

“She put a full... were you just talking about the m-word?”

Petunia visibly shivered, looking faint. “Oh, Vernon,” she wailed. “Be careful what you say... he might write to her...what the neighbours would say if his lot suddenly started showing up...”

Uncle Vernon was clearly disturbed by that thought because he accidentally leaned on the horn again. Dudley was still staring at Harry with wide eyes.

"You?" he repeated again. "Have a girlfriend?"

"Why?" Harry asked smugly. "Don't you?"

Dudley looked a little put out and decided that staring out the window and ignoring Harry was the best policy. Harry leaned back, feeling slightly smug about being able to torture his aunt and uncle. They kept shooting him panicked looks in the review mirror, clearly nervous about what to say in front of him.

Harry grinned to himself. He couldn't wait to tell Hermione.

The End

Whew.

If you have made it this far, I congratulate you.

Few things.

I really wanted to thank people, now that I'm done with Lines Crossed. So, without slipping into a long speech or anything:

Kristin and James. My lovely betas. They're both adorable and never miss an opportunity to feed the all-important-ego.

To all my lovely reviewers, the support for Lines Crossed has been overwhelming. I love you all. Especially those of you who have given such lengthy reviews on nearly every chapter.

Also, even though she'll probably never read this, my best friend Lindsey deserves tons of thanks. Without her, there probably wouldn't be a Lines Crossed. She was present when the idea first hit me and she listened to me ramble for hours when I was in the planning stages of this fic. She's just the most amazing supportive best friend

in the entire world and a supposed “non-shipper,” so she has to put up with a lot from me.

Well. So much for not babbling on. Those of you still reading, I’m wondering why, but I thank you.

One quick reference, no one caught the blatant Buffy ripping off I did in chapter 15. The Ron/Harry punch was based upon the Oz/Xander punch in Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered. In which Oz comes in and punches Xander and they follow with what has got to be a classic moment of television:

Oz: (still shaking his hand) That kinda hurt. Xander: (rubbing his cheek) Kinda?! What was that for? Oz: I was on the phone all night, listening to Willow cry about you. Now, I don't know exactly what happened, but I was left with a very strong urge to... hit you.

Heh. Okay. I have my references covered. What else?

The sequel. There will be a sequel. I’m in the middle of writing an angst-y (yes, I do write angst on occasion, thanks) multi-chaptered fic called Bend and Not Break, but I’m planning on starting on Lines’ sequel after I finish that.

And leave me a review. Because feedback is lovely.